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★ PLANET ★

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FOUR PLANET NOVELETS

- BLACK FRIAR OF THE FLAME** Isaac Asimov 2
On despised Earth alone burned the last proud flame of free Humankind.
- GODS OF SPACE** Ray Cummings 42
A strange and beautiful Earthian goddess ruled that tiny star of death.
- THE THING OF VENUS** Wilbur S. Peacock 66
Only disgraced Kenton could save the Earthlings from Venus' deadly THING.
- CHILD OF THE SUN** Leigh Brackett 102
Out where Vulcan wheeled his hidden orbit, a child of Sol played a cosmic game.

FOUR SHORT STORIES

- THE STAR-MOUSE** Fredric Brown 28
Crusoe . . . Gulliver; their adventures are nothing compared to the Saga of Mitkey.
- THE BALLAD OF VENUS NELL** Nelson S. Bond 56
"Nell was no saint, any preacher would paint a bad ending for her at a peek."
- PIED PIPER OF MARS** Frederic A. Kummer, Jr. 80
Elath Taen piped evil, fantastic music for the little men of the Red Planet.
- THE LAST MARTIAN** Raymond Van Houten 92
When the life-giving pumps of Mars stopped, a once-mighty race would die.

P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

- FEATURE FLASH** 41
Meet Fredric Brown, master of the space-trotting, cosmic-minded Mitkey.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** 118
Kicks and kudoos, hombs and houquets from the paying customers.

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BLACK FRIAR OF THE FLAME

By ISAAC ASIMOV

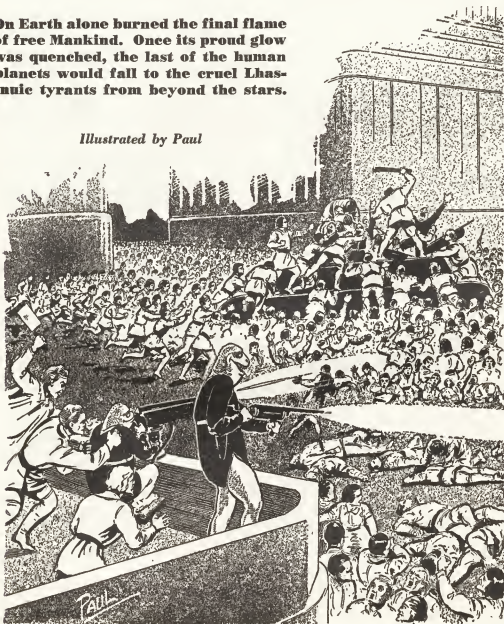
RUSSELL TYMBALL'S eyes were filled with gloomy satisfaction as they gazed at the blackened ruins of what had been a cruiser of the Lhasinuic Fleet a few hours before. The twisted

girders, scattered in all directions, were ample witness of the terrific force of the crash.

The pudgy Earthman re-entered his own sleek Strato-rocket and waited. Fingers

On Earth alone burned the final flame of free Mankind. Once its proud glow was quenched, the last of the human planets would fall to the cruel Lhasinuic tyrants from beyond the stars.

Illustrated by Paul





twisted a long cigar aimlessly for minutes before lighting it. Through the up-drifting smoke, his eyes narrowed and he remained lost in thought.

He came to his feet at the sound of a cautious hail. Two men darted in with one last fugitive glance behind them. The door closed softly, and one stepped immediately to the controls. The desolate desert landscape was far beneath them almost at once, and the silver prow of the Strato-rocket pointed for the ancient metropolis of New York.

Minutes passed before Tymball spoke, "All clear?"

The man at the controls nodded. "Not a tyrant ship about. It's quite evident the 'Grahul' has not been able to radio for help."

"You have the dispatch?" the other asked eagerly.

"We found it easily enough. It is unharmed."

"We also found," said the second man bitterly, "one other thing—the last report of Sidi Peller."

For a moment, Tymball's round face softened and something almost like pain entered his expression. And then it hardened again, "He died! But it was for Earth, and so it was not death. It was martyrdom!"

Silence, and then sadly, "Let me see the report, Petri."

He took the single, folded sheet handed him and held it before him. Slowly, he read aloud:

"On September 4, made successful entry into 'Grahul' cruiser of the tyrant fleet. Maintained self in hiding during passage from Pluto to Earth. On September 5, located dispatch in question and assumed possession. Have just shorted rocket jets. Am sealing this report in with dispatch. Long live Earth!"

Tymball's voice was strangely moved as he read the last word. "The Lhasinuic tyrants have never martyred a greater man than Sidi Peller. But we'll be repaid, and with interest. The Human Race is not quite decadent yet."

Petri stared out the window. "How did Peller do it all? One man—to stow away successfully upon a cruiser of the fleet and in the face of the entire crew to steal the dispatch and wreck the fleet. How was it

done? And we'll never know; except for the bare facts in his report."

"He had his orders," said Willums, as he locked controls and turned about. "I carried them to him on Pluto myself. Get the dispatch! Wreck the 'Grahul' in the Gobi! He did it! That's all!" He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

The atmosphere of depression deepened until Tymball himself broke it with a growl. "Forget it. Did you take care of everything at the wreck?"

The other two nodded in unison. Petri's voice was businesslike, "All traces of Peller were removed and de-atomized. They will never detect the presence of a Human among the wreckage. The document itself was replaced by the prepared copy, and carefully burnt beyond recognition. It was even impregnated with silver salts to the exact amount contained in the official seal of the Tyrant Emperor. I'll stake my head that no Lhasinu shall suspect that the crash was no accident or that the dispatch was not destroyed by it."

"Good! They won't locate the wreck for twenty-four hours at least. It's an airtight job. Let me have the dispatch now."

He fondled the metalloid container almost with reverence. It was blackened and twisted, still faintly warm. And then with a savage twist of the wrist, he tore off the lid.

The document that he lifted out unrolled with a rustling sound. At the lower left hand corner was the huge silver seal of the Lhasinuic Emperor himself—the tyrant, who from Vega, ruled one third of the Galaxy. It was addressed to the Viceroy of Sol.

The three Earthmen regarded the fine print solemnly. The harshly angular Lhasinuic script glinted redly in the rays of the setting sun.

"Was I right?" whispered Tymball.

"As always," assented Petri.

NIGHT did not really fall. The sky's black-purple deepened ever so slightly and the stars brightened imperceptibly, but aside from that the stratosphere did not differentiate between the absence and the presence of the sun.

"Have you decided upon the next step?" asked Willums, hesitantly.

"Yes—long ago. I'm going to visit Paul

Kane tomorrow, with this," and he indicated the dispatch.

"Loara Paul Kane!" cried Petri.

"That—that *Loarist*!" came simultaneously from Willums.

"The Loarist," agreed Tymball. "He is our man!"

"Say rather that he is the lackey of the Lhasinu," ground out Willums. "Kane—the head of Loarism—consequently the head of the traitor Humans who preach submission to the Lhasinu."

"That's right," Petri was pale but more calm. "The Lhasinu are our known enemies and are to be met in fair fight—but the Loarists are vermin. Great Space! I would rather throw myself on the mercy of the tyrant Viceroy himself than have anything to do with those snuffling students of ancient history, who praise the ancient glory of Earth and encompass its present degradation."

"You judge too harshly." There was the trace of a smile about Tymball's lips. "I have had dealings with this leader of Loarism before. Oh—" he checked the cries of startled dismay that rose, "I was quite discreet about it. Even you two didn't know, and, as you see, Kane has not yet betrayed me. I failed in those dealings, but I learned a little bit. Listen to me!"

Petri and Willums edged nearer, and Tymball continued in crisp, matter-of-fact tones, "The first Galactic Drive of the Lhasinu ended two thousand years ago just after the capture of Earth. Since then, the aggression has not been resumed, and the independent Human Planets of the Galaxy are quite satisfied at the maintenance of the status quo. They are too divided among themselves to welcome a return of the struggle. Loarism itself is only interested in its own survival against the encroachments of newer ways of thought, and it is no great moment to them whether Lhasinu or Human rules Earth as long as Loarism itself prospers. As a matter of fact, we—the Nationalists—are perhaps a greater danger to them in that respect than the Lhasinu."

Willums smiled grimly, "I'll say we are."

"Then, granting that, it is natural that Loarism assume the role of appeasement. Yet, if it were to their interests, they would join us at a second's notice. And this," he slapped the document before him, "is what

will convince them where their interests lie."

The other two were silent.

Tymball continued, "Our time is short. Not more than three years, perhaps not more than two. And yet you know what the chances of success for a rebellion today are."

"We'd do it," snarled Petri, and then in a muffled tone, "if the only Lhasinu we had to deal with were those of Earth."

"Exactly. But they can call upon Vega for help, and we can call upon no one. No one of the Human Planets would stir in our defense, any more than they did five hundred years ago. And that's why we must have Loarism on our side."

"And what did Loarism do five hundred years ago during the Bloody Rebellion?" asked Willums, bitter hatred in his voice. "They abandoned us to save their own precious hides."

"We are in no position to remember that," said Tymball. "We will have their help now—and then, when all is over, our reckoning with them—"

Willums returned to the controls, "New York in fifteen minutes!" And then, "But I still don't like it. What can those filthy Loarists *do*? Dried out husks fit for nothing but treason and platitudes!"

"They are the last unifying force of Humanity," answered Tymball. "Weak enough now and helpless enough, but Earth's only chance."

They were slanting downwards now into the thicker, lower atmosphere, and the whistling of the air as it streamed past them became shriller in pitch. Willums fired the braking rockets as they pierced a gray layer of clouds. There upon the horizon was the great diffuse glow of New York City.

"See that our passes are in perfect order for the Lhasinuic inspection and hide the document. They won't search us, anyway."

LOARA PAUL KANE leaned back in his ornate chair. The slender fingers of one hand played with the ivory paper-weight upon his desk. His eyes avoided those of the smaller, rounder man before him, and his voice, as he spoke, took on solemn inflections.

"I cannot risk shielding you longer, Tymball. I have done so until now because

of the bond of common Humanity between us, but—"his voice trailed away.

"But?" prompted Tymball.

Kane's fingers turned his paperweight over and over. "The Lhasinu are growing harsher this past year. They are almost arrogant." He looked up suddenly. "I am not quite a free agent, you know, and haven't the influence and power you seem to think I have."

His eyes dropped again, and a troubled note entered his voice, "The Lhasinu suspect. They are beginning to detect the workings of a tightly-knit conspiracy underground, and we cannot afford to become entangled in it."

"I know. If necessary, you are quite willing to sacrifice us as your predecessor sacrificed the patriots five centuries ago. Once again, Loarism shall play its noble part."

"What good are your rebellions?" came the weary reply. "Are the Lhasinu so much more terrible than the oligarchy of Humans that rules Santanni or the dictator that rules Trantor. If the Lhasinu are not Human, they are at least intelligent. Loarism must live at peace with the rulers."

And now Tymball smiled. There was no humor in it—rather mocking irony, and from his sleeve, he drew forth a small card.

"You think so, do you? Here, read this. It is a reduced photostat of—no, don't touch it—read it as I hold it, and—"

His further remarks were drowned in the sudden hoarse cry from the other. Kane's face twisted alarmingly into a mask of horror, as he snatched desperately at the reproduction held out to him.

"Where did you get this?" He scarcely recognized his own voice.

"What odds? I have it, haven't I? And yet it cost the life of a brave man, and a ship of His Reptilian Eminence's navy. I believe you can see that there is no doubt as to the genuineness of this."

"No—no!" Kane put a shaking hand to his forehead. "That is the Emperor's signature and seal. It is impossible to forge them."

"You see, Excellency," There was sarcasm in the title, "the renewal of the Galactic Drive is a matter of two years—or three—in the future. The first step in the drive comes within the year—and it is concerning that first step," his voice took on a poison-

ous sweetness, "that this order has been issued to the Viceroy."

"Let me think a second. Let me think." Kane dropped into his chair.

"Is there the necessity?" cried Tymball, remorselessly. "This is nothing but the fulfillment of my prediction of six months ago, to which you would not listen. Earth, as a Human world, is to be destroyed; its population scattered in groups throughout the Lhasinuic portions of the Galaxy; every trace of Human occupancy destroyed."

"But Earth! Earth, the home of the Human Race; the beginning of our civilization."

"Exactly! Loarism is dying and the destruction of Earth will kill it. And with Loarism gone, the last unifying force is destroyed, and the human planets, invincible when united, shall be wiped out, one by one, in the Second Galactic Drive. Unless—"

The other's voice was toneless.

"I know what you're going to say."

"No more than I said before. Humanity must unite, and can do so only about Loarism. It must have a Cause for which to fight, and that Cause must be the liberation of Earth. I shall fire the spark here on Earth and you must convert the Human portion of the Galaxy into a powder-keg."

"You wish a Total War—a Galactic Crusade." Kane spoke in a whisper, "yet who should know better than I that a Total War has been impossible for these thousand years." He laughed suddenly, harshly, "Do you know how weak Loarism is today?"

"Nothing is so weak that it cannot be strengthened. Although Loarism has weakened since its great days during the First Galactic Drive, you still have your organization and your discipline; the best in the Galaxy. And your leaders are, as a whole, capable men, I must say that for you. A thoroughly centralized group of capable men, working desperately, can do much. It *must* do much, for it has no choice."

"Leave me," said Kane, brokenly, "I can do no more now. I must think." His voice trailed away, but one finger pointed toward the door.

"What good are thoughts?" cried Tymball, irritably. "We need deeds!" And with that, he left.

THE night had been a horrible one for Kane. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes hollow and feverishly brilliant. Yet he spoke loudly and firmly.

"We are allies, Tymball."

Tymball smiled bleakly, took Kane's outstretched hand for a moment, and dropped it, "By necessity, Excellency, only. I am not your friend."

"Nor I yours. Yet we may work together. My initial orders have gone out and the Central Council will ratify them. In that direction, at least, I anticipate no trouble."

"How quickly may I expect results?"

"Who knows? Loarism still has its facilities for propaganda. There are still those who will listen from respect and others from fear, and still others from the mere force of the propaganda itself. But who can say? Humanity has slept, and Loarism as well. There is little anti-Lhasianic feeling, and it will be hard to drum it up out of nothing."

"Hate is never hard to drum up," and Tymball's moon-face seemed oddly harsh. "Emotionalism! Propaganda! Frank and unscrupulous opportunism! And even in its weakened state, Loarism is rich. The masses may be corrupted by words, but those in high places, the important ones, will require a bit of the yellow metal."

Kane waved a weary hand, "You preach nothing new. That line of dishonor was Human policy far back in the misty dawn of history when only this poor Earth was Human and even *it* split into warring segments." Then, bitterly, "To think that we must return to the tactics of that barbarous age."

The conspirator shrugged his shoulders cynically, "Do you know any better?"

"And even so, with all that foulness, we may yet fail."

"Not if our plans are well-laid."

Loara Paul Kane rose to his feet and his hands clenched before him, "Fool! You and your plans! Your subtle, secret, snaky, torturous plans! Do you think that conspiracy is rebellion, or rebellion, victory? What can you do? You can ferret out information and dig quietly at the roots, but you can't lead a rebellion. I can organize and prepare, but I can't lead a rebellion."

Tymball winced, "Preparation—perfect preparation—"

"Is nothing, I tell you. You can have every chemical ingredient necessary, and all the proper conditions, and yet there may be no reaction. In psychology—particularly mob psychology—as in chemistry, one must have a catalyst."

"What in Space do you mean?"

"Can *you* lead a rebellion?" cried Kane. "A crusade is a war of emotion. Can *you* control the emotions? Why, you conspirator, you could not stand the light of open warfare an instant. Can *I* lead the rebellion? I, old and a man of peace? Then who is to be the leader, the psychological catalyst, that can take the dull worthless clay of your precious 'preparation' and breathe life into it."

Russell Tymball's jaw muscles quivered, "Defeatism! So soon?"

The answer was harsh, "No! Realism!"

There was angry silence and Tymball turned on his heel and left.

IT was midnight, ship time, and the evening's festivities were reaching their high point. The grand salon of the superliner *Flaming Nova* was filled with whirling, laughing, glittering figures, growing more convivial as the night wore on.

"This reminds me of the triply-damned affairs my wife makes me attend back on Lacto," muttered Sammel Maronni to his companion. "I thought I'd be getting away from some of it, at least out here in hyperspace, but evidently I didn't." He groaned softly and gazed at the assemblage with a faintly disapproving stare.

Maronni was dressed in the peak of fashion, from purple head-sash to sky-blue sandals, and looked exceedingly uncomfortable. His portly figure was crammed into a brilliantly red and terribly tight tunic and the occasional jerks at his wide belt showed that he was only too conscious of its ill fit.

His companion, taller and slimmer, bore his spotless white uniform with an ease born of long experience and his imposing figure contrasted strongly with the slightly ridiculous appearance of Samuel Maronni.

The Lactonian exporter was conscious of this fact. "Blast it, Drake, you've got one fine job here. You dress like a nob and do nothing but look pleasant and answer salutes. How much do you get paid, anyway?"

"Not enough." Captain Drake lifted one

gray eyebrow and stared quizzically at the Lactonian. "I wish *you* had my job for a week or so. You'd sing mighty small after that. If you think taking care of fat dowager damsels and curly-headed society snobs is a bed of roses, you're welcome to it." He muttered viciously to himself for a moment and then bowed politely to a bejeweled harridan who simpered past. "It's what's grayed my hair and furrowed my brow, by Rigel."

Maronni drew a long *Karen* smoke out of his waist-pouch and lit up luxuriously. He blew a cloud of apple-green smoke into the Captain's face and smiled impishly.

"I've never heard the man yet who didn't knock his own job, even when it was the pushover yours is, you hoary old fraud. Ah, if I'm not mistaken, the gorgeous Ylen Surat is bearing down upon us."

"Oh, pink devils of Sirius! I'm afraid to look. Is that old hag actually moving in our direction?"

"She certainly is—and aren't you the lucky one. She's one of the richest women on Santanni and a widow, too. The uniform gets them, I suppose. What a pity I'm married."

Captain Drake twisted his face into a most frightful grimace, "I hope a chan-delier falls on her."

And with that he turned, his expression metamorphosed into one of bland delight in an instant, "Why, Madam Surat, I thought I'd never get the chance to see you tonight."

Ylen Surat, for whom the age of sixty was past experience, giggled girlishly, "Be still, you old flirt, or you'll make me forget that I've come here to scold you."

"Nothing is wrong, I hope?" Drake felt a sinking of the heart. He had had previous experience with Madam Surat's complaints. Things usually *were* wrong.

"A great deal is wrong. I've just been told that in fifty hours, we shall land on Earth—if that's the way you pronounce the word."

"Perfectly correct," answered Captain Drake, a bit more at ease.

"But it wasn't listed as a stop when we boarded."

"No, it wasn't. But then, you see, it's quite a routine affair. We leave ten hours after landing."

"But this is insupportable. It will delay

me an entire day. It is necessary for me to reach Santanni within the week and days are precious. Now I've never heard of Earth. My guide book,' she extracted a leather-covered volume from her reticule and flipped its pages angrily, "doesn't even mention the place. No one, I feel sure, has any interest in a halt there. If you persist in wasting the passengers' time in a perfectly useless stop, I shall take it up with the president of the line. I'll remind you that I have some little influence back home."

Captain Drake sighed inaudibly. It had not been the first time he had been reminded of Ylen Surat's "little influence." "My dear madam, you are right, entirely right, perfectly right—but I can do nothing. All ships on the Sirius, Alpha Centauri, and 61 Cygni lines must stop at Earth. It is by interstellar agreement and even the president of the line, no matter how stimulated he may be by your argument, could do nothing."

"Besides," interrupted Maronni, who thought it time to come to the aid of the beleaguered captain, "I believe that we have two passengers who are actually headed for Earth."

"That's right. I had forgotten." Captain Drake's face brightened a bit. "There! We have concrete reason for the stop as well."

"Two passengers out of over fifteen hundred! Reason, indeed!"

"You are unfair," said Maronni, lightly. "After all, it was on Earth that the Human race originated. You know that, I suppose?"

Ylen Surat lifted patently false eyebrows, "Did we?"

The blank look on her face twisted to one of disdain, "Oh, well, that was all thousands and thousands of years ago. It doesn't matter any more."

"It does to the Loarists and the two who wish to land are Loarists."

"Do you mean to say," sneered the widow, "that there are still people in this enlightened age who go about studying 'our ancient culture.' Isn't that what they're always talking about?"

"That's what Filip Sanat is always talking about," laughed Maronni. "He gave me a long sermon only a few days ago on that very subject. And it was interesting,

too. There was a lot to what he said."

He nodded lightly and continued, "He's got a good head on him, that Filip Sanat. He might have made a good scientist or businessman."

"Speak of meteors and hear them whizz," said the Captain, suddenly, and nodded his head to the right.

"Well!" gasped Maronni. "There he is. But—but what in space is he doing *here*?"

Filip Sanat *did* make a rather incongruous picture as he stood framed in the far doorway. His long, dark purple tunic—mark of the Loarist—was a sombre splotch upon an otherwise gay scene. His grave eyes turned toward Maronni and he lifted his hand in immediate recognition.

Astonished dancers made way automatically as he passed staring at him long and curiously afterwards. One could hear the wake of whispering that he left in his path. Filip Sanat, however, took no notice of this. Eyes fixed stonily ahead of him and expression stolidly immobile, he reached Captain Drake, Sammel Maronni, and Ylen Surat.

FILIP SANAT greeted the two men warmly and then, in response to an introduction, bowed gravely to the widow, who regarded him with surprise and open disdain.

"Pardon me for disturbing you, Captain Drake," said the young man, in a low tone. "I only want to know at what time we are leaving hyper-space."

The captain yanked out a corpulent pocket-chromo. "An hour from now. Not more."

"And we shall then be—?"

"Just outside the orbit of Planet IX."

"That would be Pluto. Sol will then be in sight as we enter normal space?"

"If you're looking in the right direction, it will be—toward the prow of the ship."

"Thank you," Filip Sanat made as if to depart, but Maronni detained him.

"Hold on there, Filip, you're not going to leave us, are you? I'm sure Madam Surat here is fairly dying to ask you several questions. She has displayed great interest in Loarism." There was more than the suspicion of a twinkle in the Lactonian's eye.

Filip Sanat turned politely to the widow, who, taken aback for the moment, re-

mained speechless, and then recovered.

"Tell me, young man," she burst forth, "are there really still people like you left? —Loarists, I mean."

Filip Sanat started and stared quite rudely at his questioner, but did not lose his tongue. With calm distinctness, he said, "There are still people left who try to maintain the culture and way of life of ancient Earth."

Captain Drake could not forbear a tiny bit of irony, "Even down to the culture of the Lhasinuic masters?"

Ylen Surat uttered a stifled scream, "Do you mean to say Earth is a Lhasinuic world? Is it? Is it?" Her voice rose to a frightened squeak.

"Why, certainly," answered the puzzled captain, sorry that he had spoken. "Didn't you know?"

"Captain," there was hysteria in the woman's voice. "You *must* not land. If you do, I shall make trouble—plenty of trouble. I will *not* be exposed to hordes of those terrible Lhasinu—those awful reptiles from Vega."

"You need not fear, Madam Surat," observed Filip Sanat, coldly, "The vast majority of Earth's population is very much human. It is only the one percent that rules that is Lhasinuic."

"Oh—" A pause, and then, in a wounded manner, "Well, I don't think Earth can be so important, if it is not even ruled by Humans. Loarism indeed! Silly waste of time, I call it!"

Sanat's face flushed suddenly, and for a moment he seemed to struggle vainly for speech. When he did speak, it was in an agitated tone, "You have a very superficial view. The fact that the Lhasinu control Earth has nothing to do with the fundamental problem of Loarism which—"

He turned on his heel and left.

Sammel Maronni drew a long breath as he watched the retreating figure. You hit him in a sore spot, Madam Surat, I never saw him squirm away from an argument or an attempt at an explanation in that way before.

"He's not a bad looking chap," said Captain Drake.

Maronni chuckled, "Not by a long shot. We're from the same planet, that young fellow and I. He's a typical Lactonian, like me."

The widow cleared her throat grumpily, "Oh, let us change the subject by all means. That person seems to have cast a shadow over the entire room. Why do they wear those awful purple robes? So unstylish!"

LOARA BROOS PORIN glanced up as his young acolyte entered.

"Well?"

"In less than forty-five minutes, Loara Broos."

And throwing himself into a chair, Sanat leaned a flushed and frowning face upon one balled fist.

Porin regarded the other with an affectionate smile, "Have you been arguing with Sammel Maronni again, Filip?"

"No, not exactly." He jerked himself upright. "But what's the use, Loara Broos? There, on the upper level, are hundreds of Humans, thoughtless, gaily dressed, laughing, frolicking; and there outside is Earth, disregarded. Only we two of the entire ship's company are stopping there to view the world of our ancient days."

His eyes avoided that of the older man and his voice took on a bitter tinge, "And once thousands of Humans from every corner of the Galaxy landed on Earth every day. The great days of Loarism are over."

Loara Broos laughed. One would not have thought such a hearty laugh to be in his spindly figure. "That is at least the hundredth time I have heard that said by you. Foolish! The day will come when Earth will once more be remembered. People will yet again flock. By the thousands and millions they'll come."

"No! It is over!"

"Bah! The croaking prophets of doom have said that over and over again through history. They have yet to prove themselves right."

"This time they will." Sanat's eyes blazed suddenly, "Do you know why? It is because Earth is profaned by the reptile conquerors. A woman has just said to me—a vain, stupid, shallow woman—that 'I don't think Earth can be so important if it is not even ruled by Humans.' She said what billions must say unconsciously, and I hadn't the words to refute her. It was one argument I couldn't answer."

"And what would your solution be, Filip? Come, have you thought it out."

"Drive them from Earth! Make it a

Human planet once more! We fought them once during the First Galactic Drive two thousand years ago, and stopped them when it seemed as if they might absorb the Galaxy. Let us make a Second Drive of our own and hurl them back to Vega."

Porin sighed and shook his head, "You young hothead! There never was a young Loarist who didn't eat fire on the subject. You'll outgrow it. You'll outgrow it."

"Look, my son!" Loara Broos arose and grasped the other by the shoulders, "Man and Lhasinu have intelligence, and are the only two intelligent races of the Galaxy. They are brothers in mind and spirit. Be at peace with them. Don't hate; it is the most unreasoning emotion. Instead, strive to understand."

Filip Sanat stared stonily at the ground and made no indication that he heard. His mentor clicked his tongue in gentile rebuke.

"Well, when you are older, you will understand. Now, forget all this, Filip. Remember that the ambition of every real Loarist is about to be fulfilled for you. In two days, we shall reach Earth and its soil shall be under your feet. Isn't that enough to make you happy? Just think! When you return, you shall be awarded the title 'Loara.' You shall be one who has visited Earth. The golden sun will be pinned to your shoulder."

Porin's hand crept to the staring yellow orb upon his own tunic, mute witness of his three previous visits to Earth.

"Loara Filip Sanat," said Sanat slowly, eyes glistening. "Loara Filip Sanat. It has a wonderful sound, hasn't it? And only a little ways off."

"Now then, you feel better. But come, in a few moments we shall leave hyperspace and we will see Sol."

Already, even as he spoke, the thick, choking cloak of hyper-stuff that clung so closely to the sides of the *Flaming Nova* was going through those curious changes that marked the beginning of the shift to normal space. The blackness lightened a bit and concentric rings of various shades of gray chased each other across the port-view with gradually hastening speed. It was a weird and beautiful optical illusion that science has never succeeded in explaining.

Porin clicked off the lights in the room, and the two sat quietly in the dark, watch-

ing the feeble phosphorescence of the racing ripples as they sped into a blur. Then, with a terrifying silent suddenness, the whole structure of hyper-stuff seemed to burst apart in a whirling madhouse of brilliant color. And then all was peaceful again. The stars sparkled quietly, against the curved backdrop of normal space.

And up in the corner of the port blazed the brightest spark of the sky with a luminous yellow flame that lit up the faces of the two men into pale, waxen masks. It was Sol!

The birth-star of Man was so distant that it lacked a perceptible disc, yet it was incomparably the brightest object to be seen. In its feeble yellow light, the two remained in quiet thought, and Filip Sanat grew calmer.

In two days, the *Flaming Nova* landed on Earth.

FILIP SANAT forgot the delicious thrill that had seized him at the moment when his sandals first came into contact with the firm green sod of Earth, when he caught his first glimpse of a Lhasinu official.

They seemed actually *human*—or humanoid, at least.

At first glance, the predominantly Man-like characteristics drowned out all else. The body plan differed in no essential from Man's. The four-limbed, bipedal body; the middling-well proportioned arms and legs; the well-defined neck, were all astonishingly in evidence. It was only after a few minutes that the smaller details marking the difference between the two races were noticed at all.

Chief of these were the scales covering the head and a thick line down the backbone, halfway to the hips. The face itself, with its flat, broad, thinly-scaled nose and lidless eyes was rather repulsive, but in no way bestial. Their clothes were few and simple, and their speech quite pleasant to the ear. And, what was most important, there was no masking the intelligence that showed forth in their dark, luminous eyes.

Porin noted Sanat's surprise at this first glimpse of the Vegan reptiles with every sign of satisfaction.

"You see," he remarked, "their appearance is not at all monstrous. Why should

hate exist between Human and Lhasinu then."

Sanat didn't answer. Of course, his old friend was right. The word "Lhasinu" had so long been coupled with the words "alien" and "monster" in his mind, that against all knowledge and reason, he had subconsciously expected to see some weird life-form.

Yet overlying the foolish feeling this realization induced was the same haunting hate that clung closely to him, growing to fury as they passed inspection by an overbearing English-speaking Lhasinu.

The next morning, the two left for New York, the largest city of the planet. In the historic lore of the unbelievably ancient metropolis, Sanat forgot for a day the troubles of the Galaxy outside. It was a great moment for him when he finally stood before a towering structure and said to himself, "This is the Memorial."

The Memorial was Earth's greatest monument, dedicated to the birthplace of the Human race, and this was Wednesday, the day of the week when two men "guarded the Flame." Two men, alone in the Memorial, watched over the flickering yellow fire that symbolized Human courage and Human initiative—and Porin had already arranged that the choice should fall that day upon himself and Sanat, as being two newly-arrived Loarists.

And so, in the fading twilight, the two sat alone in the spacious Flame Room of the Memorial. In the murky, semi-darkness, lit only by the fitful glare of a dancing yellow flame, a quiet peace descended upon them.

There was something about the brooding aura of the place that wiped all mental disturbance clean away. There was something about the wavering shadows as they weaved through the pillars of the long colonade on either side, that cast a hypnotic spell.

Gradually, he fell into a half doze, and out of sleepy eyes regarded the Flame intently, until it became a living being of light weaving a dim, silent figure beside him.

But tiny sounds are sufficient to disturb a reverie, especially when contrasted with a hitherto deep silence. Sanat stiffened suddenly, and grasped Porin's elbow in a fierce grip.

"Listen," he hissed the warning quietly.

Porin started violently out of a peaceful day-dream, regarded his young companion with uneasy intentness, then, without a word, trumpeted one ear. The silence was thicker than ever—also a tangible cloak. Then the faintest possible scraping of feet upon marble, far off. A low whisper, down at the limits of audibility, and then silence again.

"What is it?" he asked bewilderedly of Sanat, who had already risen to his feet. "Lhasinu!" ground out Sanat; face a mask of hate-filled indignation.

"Impossible!" Porin strove to keep his voice coldly steady, but it trembled in spite of itself. "It would be an unheard-of event. We are just imagining things now. Our nerves are rubbed raw by this silence, that is all. Perhaps it is some official of the Memorial."

"After sunset, on Wednesday?" came Sanat's strident voice. "That is as illegal as the entrance of Lhasinuic lizards, and far more unlikely. It is my duty as a Guardian of the Flame to investigate this."

He made as if to walk toward the shadowed door and Porin caught his wrist fearfully, "Don't, Filip. Let us forget this until sunrise. One can never tell what will happen. What can you do, even supposing that Lhasinu have entered the Memorial? If you—"

But Sanat was no longer listening. Roughly, he shook off the other's desperate grasp, "Stay here! The Flame must be guarded. I shall be back soon."

He was already half way across the wide marble-floored hall. Cautiously, he approached the glass-paned door to the dark, twisting staircase that circled its way upwards through the twilight gloom into the desert recesses of the tower.

Slipping off his sandals, he crept up the stairs, casting one last look back toward the softly luminous Flame, and toward the nervous, frightened figure standing beside it.

THE two Lhasinu stared about them in the pearly light of the Atomo lamp. "Dreary old place," said Threg Ban Sola. His wrist camera clicked three times. "Take down a few of those books on the walls. They'll serve as additional proof."

"Do you think we ought to," asked Cor

Wen Hasta. "These Human apes may miss them."

"Let them!" came the cool response. "What can they do? Here, sit down!" He flicked a hasty glance upon his chronometer. "We'll get fifty credits for every minute we stay, so we might as well pile up enough to last us for a while."

"Pirat For is a fool. What made him think we wouldn't take the bet?"

"I think," said Ban Sola, "he's heard about the soldier torn to pieces last year for looting a European museum. The Humans didn't like it, though Loarism is filthy rich, Vega knows. The Humans were disciplined, of course, but the soldier was dead. Anyway, what Pirat For doesn't know is that the Memorial is deserted Wednesdays. This is going to cost him money."

"Fifty credits a minute. And it's been seven minutes now."

"Three hundred and fifty credits. Sit down. We'll play a game of cards and watch our money mount."

Threg Ban Sola drew forth a worn pack of cards from his pouch which, though they were typically and essentially Lhasinuic, bore unmistakable traces of their Human derivation.

"Put the Atomo-light on the table and I'll sit between it and the window," he continued peremptorily, shuffling the cards as he spoke. "Hah! I'll warrant no Lhasinu ever gamed in such an atmosphere. Why, it will triple the zest of the play."

Cor Wen Hasta seated himself, and then rose again, "Did you hear anything?" He stared into the shadows beyond the half-open door.

"No," Ban Sola frowned and continued shuffling. "You're not getting nervous, are you?"

"Of course not. Still, if they *were* to catch us here in this blasted tower, it might not be pleasant."

"Not a chance. The shadows are making you jumpy." He dealt the hands.

"Do you know," said Wen Hasta, studying his cards carefully, "it wouldn't be so nice if the Viceroy were to get wind of this, either. I imagine he wouldn't deal lightly with offenders of the Loarists as a matter of policy. Back on Sirius, where I served before I was shifted, the scum—"

"Scum, all right," grunted Ban Sola. "They breed like flies and fight each other like mad bulls. Look at the creatures!" He turned his cards downward and grew argumentative. "I mean, look at them scientifically and impartially. What are they? Only mammals! Mammals that can think, in a way; but mammals just the same. That's all."

"I know. Did you ever visit one of the Human worlds?"

Ban Sola smiled, "I may, pretty soon."

"Furlough?" Wen Hasta registered polite astonishment.

"Furlough, my scales. With my ship! And with guns shooting!"

"What do you mean?" There was a sudden glint in Wen Hasta's eyes.

Ban Sola's grin grew mysterious. This isn't supposed to be known, even among us officers, but you know how things leak out."

Wen Hasta nodded, "I know." Both had lowered their voices instinctively.

"Well. The Second Drive will be on now any time."

"No!"

"Fact! And we're starting right here. By Vega, the Viceregal Palace is buzzing with nothing else. Some of the officers have even started a lottery on the exact date of the first move. I've got a hundred credits at twenty to one myself. But then, I drew only to the nearest week. You can get a hundred and fifty to one, if you're nervy enough to pick a particular day."

"But why here on this Galaxy-forsaken planet?"

"Strategy on the part of the Home Office." Ban Sola leaned forward. "The position we're in now has us facing a numerically superior enemy hopelessly divided amongst itself. If we can keep them so, we can take them over one by one. The Human Worlds would just naturally rather cut their own throats than co-operate with each other."

Wen Hasta grinned agreement, "That's typical mammalian behavior for you. Evolution must have laughed when she gave a brain to an ape."

"But Earth has particular significance. It's the center of Loarism, because the Humans originated here. It corresponds to our own Vegan system."

"Do you mean that? But you couldn't!

This little two-by-four fly-speck?"

"That's what they say. I wasn't here at the time, so I wouldn't know. But anyway, if we can destroy Earth, we can destroy Loarism which is centered here. It was Loarism, the historians say, that united the Worlds against us at the end of the First Drive. No Loarism; the last fear of enemy unification is gone; and victory is easy."

"Damned clever! How are we going to go about it?"

"Well, the word is that they're going to pack up every last Human on Earth and scatter them through the subject worlds. Then we can remove everything else on Earth that smells of the Mammals and make it an entirely Lhasinuic world."

"But when?"

"We don't know; hence the lottery. But no one has placed his bet at a period more than two years in the future."

"Hurrah for Vega! I'll give you two to one I riddle a Human cruiser before you do, when the time comes."

"Done," cried Ban Sola. "I'll put up fifty credits."

They rose to touch fists in token and Wen Hasta grinned at his chronometer, "Another minute and we'll have an even thousand credits coming to us. Poor Pirat For. He'll groan. Let's go now; more would be extortionate."

There was low laughter as the two Lhasinu left, long cloaks swishing softly behind them. They did not notice the slightly darker shadow hugging the wall at the head of the stairs, though they almost brushed it as they passed. Nor did they sense the burning eyes focused upon them as they descended noiselessly.

L OARA BROOS PORIN jerked to his feet with a sob of relief as he saw the figure of Filip Sanat stumble across the hall toward him. He ran to him eagerly, grasping both hands tightly.

"What kept you, Filip? You don't know what wild thoughts have passed through my head this past hour. If you had been gone another five minutes, I would have gone mad for sheer suspense and uncertainty. But what's wrong?"

It took several moments for Loara Broos' wild relief to subside sufficiently to note the other's trembling hands, his

disheveled hair, his feverishly-glinting eyes; but when it did, all his fears returned.

He watched Sanat in dismay, scarcely daring to press his question for fear of the answer. But Sanat needed no urging. In short, jerky sentences he related the conversation he had overheard and his last words trailed into a despairing silence.

Loara Broos' pallor was almost frightening, and twice he tried to talk with no success other than a few hoarse gasps. Then, finally, "But it is the death of Loarism! What is to be done?"

Filip Sanat laughed, as men laugh when they are at last convinced that nothing remains to laugh at. "What *can* be done? Can we inform the Central Council? You know only too well how helpless they are. The various Human governments? You can imagine how effective *those* divided fools would be."

"But it can't be true! It simply can't be!"

Sanat remained silent for seconds, and then his face twisted agonizedly and in a voice thick with passion, he shouted, "I won't have it! Do you hear? It *shan't* be! I'll stop it!"

It was easy to see that he had lost control of himself; that wild emotion was driving him. Porin, large drops of perspiration on his brow, grasped him about the waist, "Sit down, Filip, sit down! Are you going crazy?"

"No!" With a sudden push, he sent Porin stumbling backwards into a sitting position, while the Flame wavered and flickered madly in the rush of air, "I'm going sane. The time for idealism and compromise and subservience is gone! The time for force has come! We will fight and, by Space, we will win!"

He was leaving the room at a dead run.

Porin limped after, "Filip! Filip!" He stopped at the doorway in frightened despair. He could go no further. Though the Heavens fell, someone must guard the Flame.

But—but what was Filip Sanat going to do. And through Porin's tortured mind flickered visions of a certain night, five hundred years before, when a careless word, a blow, a shot, had lit a fire over Earth that was finally drowned in Human blood.

LOARA PAUL KANE was alone that night. The inner office was empty; the dim, blue light upon the severely simple desk the only illumination in the room. His thin face was bathed in the ghastly light, and his chin buried musingly between his hands.

And then there was a crashing interruption as the door was flung open and a disheveled Russell Tymball knocked off the restraining hands of half a dozen men and catapulted in. Kane whirled in dismay at the intrusion and one hand flew up to his throat as his eyes widened in apprehension. His face was one startled question.

Tymball waved his arm in a quieting gesture. "It's all right. Just let me catch my breath." He wheezed a bit, and seated himself gently before continuing, "Your catalyst has turned up, Loara Paul—and guess where. Here on Earth! Here in New York! Not half a mile from where we're sitting now!"

Loara Paul Kane eyed Tymball narrowly, "Are you mad?"

"Not so you can notice it. I'll tell you about it, if you don't mind turning on a light or two. You look like a ghost in the blue." The room whitened under the glare of Atomos and Tymball continued, "Ferni and I were returning from the meeting. We were passing the Memorial when it happened, and you can thank Fate for the lucky coincidence that led us to the right spot at the right moment.

"As we passed, a figure shot out the side entrance, jumped on the marble steps in front, and shouted, 'Men of Earth!' Everyone turned to look—you know how filled Memorial Sector is at eleven—and inside of two seconds, he had a crowd."

"Who was the speaker, and what was he doing inside the Memorial? This is Wednesday night, you know."

"Why," Tymball paused to consider, "now that you mention it, he must have been one of the two Guardians. He was a Loarist—you couldn't mistake the tunic. He wasn't Terrestrial, either!"

"Did he wear the yellow orb?"

"No."

"Then I know who he was. He's Porin's young friend. Go ahead."

"There he stood!" Tymball was warming to his task. "He was some twenty

feet above street level. You have no idea what an impressive figure he made with the glare of the Luxites lighting his face. He was handsome, but not in an athletic, brawny way. He was the aesthetic type, if you know what I mean. Pale, thin face, burning eyes, long, brown hair.

"And when he spoke! It's no use describing it; in order to appreciate it really, you would have to hear him. He began telling the crowd of the Lhasinuic designs; shouting what *I* had been whispering. Evidently, he had gotten them from a good source, for he went into details—and how he put them! He made them sound real and frightening. He frightened *me* with them; had me standing there scared blue at what he was saying; and as for the crowd, after the second sentence, they were hypnotized. Everyone of them had had 'Lhasinuic Menace' drilled into them over and over again, but this was the first time they listened—actually *listened*.

"Then, he began damning the Lhasinu. He rang the changes on their bestiality, their perfidy, their criminality—only he had a vocabulary that raked them into the lowest mud of a Venusian ocean. And every time he let loose with an epithet, the crowd stood upon its hind legs and let out a roar. It began to sound like a catechism. 'Shall we allow this to go on?' cried he. 'Never!' yelled the crowd. 'Must we yield?' 'Never!' 'Shall we resist?' 'To the end!' 'Down with the Lhasinu!' he shouted. 'Kill them!' they howled.

"I howled as loud as any of them—forgot myself entirely.

"I don't know how long it lasted before Lhasinuic guards began closing in. The crowd turned on them, with the Loarist urging them on. Did you ever hear a mob yell for blood? No? It's the most awful sound you can imagine. The guards thought so, too, for one look at what was before them made them turn and run for their lives, in spite of the fact that they were armed. The mob had grown into a matter of thousands and thousands by then.

"But in two minutes, the alarm siren sounded—for the first time in a hundred years. I came to my senses at last, and made for the Loarist, who had not

stopped his tirade a moment. It was plain that we couldn't let him fall into the hands of the Lhasinu.

"The rest is pretty much of a mixup. Squadrons of motorized police were charging down on us, but somehow, Ferni and I managed between the two of us to grab the Loarist, slip out, and bring him here. I have him in the outer room, gagged and tied, to keep him quiet."

During all the last half of the narrative, Kane had paced the floor nervously, pausing every once in a while in deep consideration. Little flecks of blood appeared on his lower lip.

"You don't think," he asked, "that the riot will get out of hand? A premature explosion—"

Tymball shook his head vigorously, "They're mopping up already. Once the young fellow disappeared, the crowd lost its spirit, anyway."

"There will be many killed or hurt, but— Well, bring in the young firebrand." Kane seated himself behind his desk and composed his face into a semblance of tranquillity.

Filip Sanat was in sad shape as he kneeled before his superior. His tunic was in tatters, and his face scratched and bloody, but the fire of determination shone as brilliantly as ever in his fierce eyes. Russell Tymball regarded him breathlessly as though the previous hour's magic still lingered.

Kane extended his arm gently, "I have heard of your wild escapade, my boy. What was it that impelled you to do so foolish an act? It might very well have cost you your life, to say nothing of the lives of thousands of others."

For the second time that night, Sanat repeated the conversation he had overheard—dramatically and in the minutest detail.

"Just so, just so," said Kane, with a grim smile, upon the conclusion of the tale, "and did you think we knew nothing of this? For a long time we have been preparing against this danger, and you have come near to upsetting all our carefully laid plans. By your premature appeal, you might have worked irreparable harm to our cause."

Filip Sanat reddened, "Pardon my inexperienced enthusiasm—"

"Exactly," exclaimed Kane. "Yet, properly directed, you might be of great aid to us. Your oratory and youthful fire might work wonders if well managed. Would you be willing to dedicate yourself to the task?"

Sanat's eyes flashed, "Need you ask?"

Loara Paul Kane laughed and cast a jubilant side-glance at Russell Tymball, "You'll do. In two days, you shall leave for the outer stars. With you, will go several of my own men. And now, you are tired. You will be taken to where you may wash and treat your cuts. Then, you had better sleep, for you shall need your strength in the days to come."

"But—but Loara Broos Porin—my companion at the Flame?"

"I shall send a messenger to the Memorial immediately. He will tell Loara Broos of your safety and serve as the second Guardian for the remainder of the night. Go now!"

But even as Sanat, relieved and deliriously happy, rose to go, Russell Tymball leaped from his chair and grasped the older Loarist's wrist in a convulsive grip.

"Great Spacel! Listen!"

The shrill, keening whine that pierced to the inner sanctum of Kane's offices told its own story. Kane's face turned haggard.

"It's martial law!"

Tymball's very lips had turned bloodless, "We lost out after all. They're using tonight's disturbance to strike the first blow. They're after Sanat, and they'll have him. A mouse couldn't get through the cordon they're going to throw about the city now."

"But they musn't have him." Kane's eyes glittered. "We'll take him to the Memorial by the Passageway. They won't dare violate the Memorial."

"They have done it once already," came Sanat's impassioned cry. "I won't hide from the lizards. Let us fight."

"Quiet," said Kane, "and follow silently."

A panel in the wall had slid aside and toward it Kane motioned.

And as the panel closed noiselessly behind them, leaving them in the cold glow of a pocket Atomo lamp, Tymball muttered softly, "If they are ready, even the Memorial will yield no protection."

NEW YORK was in ferment. The Lhasinuic garrison had mustered its full strength and placed it in a state of siege. No one might enter. No one might leave. Through the key avenues, rolled the ground cars of the army, while overhead poised the Strato-cars that guarded the airways.

The Human population stirred restlessly. They percolated through the streets, gathering in little knots that broke up at the approach of the Lhasinu. The spell of Sanat lingered, and here and there frowning men exchanged angry whispers.

The atmosphere crackled with tension.

The Viceroy of New York realized that as he sat behind his desk in the Palace, which raised its spires upon Washington Heights. He stared out the window at the Hudson River, flowing darkly beneath and addressed the uniformed Lhasinu before him.

"There must be positive action, Captain. You are right in that. And yet, if possible, an outright break must be avoided. We are woefully undernamed and we haven't more than five third-rate war-vessels on the entire planet."

"It is not our strength but their own fear that keeps them helpless, Excellency. Their spirit has been thoroughly broken in these last centuries. The rabble would break before a single unit of Guardsmen. That is precisely the reason why we must strike hard now. The population has reared and they must feel the whip immediately. The Second Drive may as well begin tonight."

"Yes," the Viceroy grimaced wryly. "We are caught off-stride, but the—er—rabble-rouser must be made an example of. You have him, of course."

The captain smiled grimly, "No. The Human dog had powerful friends. He is a Loarist, you know. Kane—"

"Is Kane standing against us?" Two red spots burnt over the Viceroy's eyes. "The fool presumes! The troops are to arrest the rebel in spite of him—and him, too, if he objects."

"Excellency!" the captain's voice rang metallically. "We have reason to believe the rebel may be skulking in the Memorial."

The Viceroy half-rose to his feet. He

scowled in indecision and seated himself once more, "The Memorial! That presents difficulties!"

"Not necessarily!"

"There are some things those Humans won't stand." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

The Captain spoke decisively, "The nettle seized firmly does not sting. Quickly done—a criminal could be dragged from the Hall of the Flame itself—and we kill Loarism at a stroke. There could be no struggle after that supreme defiance."

"By Vega! Blast me, if you're not right. Good! Storm the Memorial!"

The Captain bowed stiffly, turned on his heel, and left the Palace.

FILIP SANAT re-entered the Hall of Flame, thin face set angrily, "The entire Sector is patrolled by the lizards. All avenues of approach to the Memorial have been shut off."

Russell Tymball rubbed his jaw, "Oh, they're not fools. They've treed us and the Memorial won't stop them. As a matter of fact, they may have decided to make this The Day."

Filip frowned and his voice was thickly furious, "And we're to wait here, are we? Better to die fighting, than to die hiding."

"Better not to die at all, Filip," responded Tymball quietly.

There was a moment of silence. Loara Paul Kane sat staring at his fingers.

Finally, he said, "If you were to give the signal to strike now, Tymball, how long could you hold out?"

"Until Lhasinuic reinforcements could arrive in sufficient numbers to crush us. The Terrestrial garrison, including the entire Solar Patrol, is not enough to stop us. Without outside help, we can fight effectively for six months at the very least. Unfortunately it's out of the question." His composure was unruffled.

"Why is it out of the question?"

And his face reddened suddenly, as he sprang angrily to his feet, "Because you can't just push buttons. The Lhasinu are weak. My men know that, but Earth doesn't. The lizards have one weapon, fear! We can't defeat them, unless the populace is with us, at least passively."

2—Planet Stories—Spring

His mouth twisted, "You don't know the practical difficulties involved. Ten years now I've been planning, working, trying. I have an army; and a respectable fleet in the Appalachians. I could set the wheels in motion in all five continents simultaneously. But what good would it do? It would be useless. If I had New York now—if I were able to prove to the rest of Earth that the Lhasinu were not invincible."

"If I could banish fear from the hearts of Humans?" said Kane softly.

"I would have New York by dawn. But it would take a miracle."

"Perhaps! Do you think you can get through the cordon and reach your men?"

"I could if I had to. What are you going to do?"

"You will know when it happens." Kane was smiling fiercely. "And when it does happen, strike!"

There was a Tonite gun in Tymball's hand suddenly, as he backed away. His plump face was not at all gentle, "I'll take a chance, Kane. Good-bye!"

THE captain strode up the deserted marble steps of the Memorial arrogantly. He was flanked on each side by an armed adjutant.

He paused an instant before the huge double-door that loomed up before him and stared at the slender pillars that soared gracefully upwards at its sides.

There was faint sarcasm in his smile, "Impressive, all this, isn't it?"

"Yes, Captain!" was the double reply.

"And mysteriously dark, too, except for the dim yellow of their Flame. You see its light?" He pointed toward the stained glass of the bottom windows which glinted flickeringly.

"Yes, Captain!"

"It's dark, and mysterious, and impressive—and it is about to fall in ruins." He laughed, and suddenly brought the butt end of his saber down upon the metal carvings on the door in a clanging salvo.

It echoed through the emptiness within and sounded hollowly in the night, but there was no answer.

The adjutant at his left raised his telescope to his ear, and caught the faint words issuing therefrom. He saluted,

"Captain, the Humans are crowding into the sector."

The captain sneered, "Let them! Order the guns placed in readiness and aimed along the avenues. Any Human attempting to pass the cordon is to be rayed mercilessly."

His barked command was murmured into the televisor and a hundred yards beyond, Lhasinuic Guardsmen put guns in order and aimed them carefully. A low, inchoate murmur went up—a murmur of fear. Men pressed back.

"If the door does not open," said the captain, grimly, "it is to be broken down." He raised his saber again, and again there was the thunder of metal on metal.

Slowly, noiselessly, the door yawned wide, and the captain recognized the stern, purple-clad figure that stood before him.

"Who disturbs the Memorial on the night of the Guarding of the Flame?" demanded Loara Paul Kane solemnly.

"Very dramatic, Kane. Stand aside!"

"Back!" The words rang out loudly and clearly. "The Memorial may not be approached by the Lhasinu."

"Yield us our prisoner, and we leave. Refuse, and we will take him by force."

"The Memorial yields no prisoner. It is inviolate. You may not enter."

"Make way!"

"Stand back!"

The Lhasinu growled throatily and became aware of a dim roaring. The streets about him were empty, but a block away in every direction was the thin line of Lhasinuic troops, stationed at their guns, and beyond were the Humans. They were massed in noisy thickness and the whites of their faces shone palely in the Chromo-lights.

"What," gritted the captain to himself, "do the scum yet snarl?" His tough skin ridged at the jaws and the scales upon his head uptilted sharply. He turned to the adjutant with the televisor. "Order a round over their heads."

The night was split in two by the purple blasts of energy and the Lhasinu laughed aloud at the silence that followed.

He turned to Kane, who remained standing upon the threshold. "So you see that if you expect help from your

people, you will be disappointed. The next round will be aimed at head level. If you think that bluff, try me!"

Teeth clicked together sharply, "Make way!" A Tonite was leveled in his hand, and thumb was firm upon the trigger.

Loara Paul Kane retreated slowly, eyes upon the gun. The captain followed. And as he did so, the inner door of the anteroom swung open and the Hall of the Flame stood revealed. In the sudden draft, the Flame staggered, and at the sight of it, there came a huge shout from the distant spectators.

Kane turned toward it, face raised upwards. The motion of one of his hands was all but imperceptible.

And the Flame suddenly changed. It steadied and roared up to the vaulted ceiling, a blazing shaft fifty feet high. Loara Paul Kane's hand moved again, and as it did so, the Flame turned carmine. The color deepened and the crimson light of that flaming pillar streamed out into the city and turned the Memorial's windows into staring, bloody eyes.

Long seconds passed, while the captain froze in bewilderment; while the distant mass of Humanity fell into awed silence.

And, then, there was a confused murmur, which strengthened and grew and split itself into one vast shout.

"Down with the Lhasinu!"

There was the purple flash of a Tonite from somewhere high above, and the captain came to life an instant too late. Caught squarely, he bent slowly to his death; cold, reptilian face a mask of conetmpt to the last.

RUSSELL TYMBALL brought down his gun and smiled sardonically, "A perfect target against the Flame. Good for Kane! The changing of the Flame was just the emotion-stirring thing we needed. Let's go!"

From the roof of Kane's dwelling he aimed down upon the Lhasinu below. And as he did, all Hell erupted. Men mushroomed from the very ground, it seemed, weapons in hand. Tonites blazed from every side, before the startled Lhasinu could spring to their triggers.

And when they did so, it was too late, for the mob, white-hot with flaring rage,

broke its bounds. Someone shrieked, "Kill the lizards!" and the cry was taken up in one roaring ululation that swelled to the sky.

Like a many-headed monster, the stream of Humanity surged forward, weaponless. Hundreds withered under the belated fury of the defending guns and tens of thousands scrambled over the corpses, charging to the very muzzles.

The Lhasinu never wavered. Their ranks thinned steadily under the deadly sharp-shooting of the Tymballists, and those that remained were caught by the Human flood that surged over them and tore them to horrible death.

The Memorial sector gleamed in the crimson of the bloody Flame and echoed to the agony of the dying, and the shrieking fury of the triumphant.

It was the first battle of the Great Rebellion, but it was not really a battle, or even madness. It was concentrated anarchy.

Throughout the city, from the tip of Long Island to the mid-Jersey flatlands, rebels sprang from nowhere and Lhasinu went to their death. And as quickly as Tymball's orders spread to raise the snipers, so did the news of the changing of the Flame speed from mouth to mouth and grow in the telling. All New York heaved, and poured its separate lives into the single giant crucible of the "mob."

It was uncontrollable, unanswerable, irresistible. The Tymballists followed helplessly where it led, all efforts at direction hopeless from the start.

Like a mighty river, it lashed its way through the metropolis, and where it passed no living Lhasinu remained.

The sun of that fateful morning arose to find the masters of Earth occupying a shrinking circle in upper Manhattan. With the cool courage of born soldiers, they linked arms and withstood the charging, shrieking millions. Slowly, they backed away; each building a skirmish; each block a desperate battle. They split into isolated groups; defending first a building, and then its upper stories, and finally its roof.

With the noonday sun boiling down, only the Palace itself remained. Its last desperate stand held the Humans at bay. The withering circle of fire about it

paved the grounds with blackened bodies. The Viceroy himself from his throne-room directed the defense; his own hand upon the butt of a semi-portable.

And then, when the mob had finally come to a pause, Tymball seized his opportunity and took the lead. Heavy guns clanked to the front. Atomos and delta-rays, from the rebel stock and from the stores captured the previous night, pointed their death-laden muzzles at the Palace.

Gun answered gun, and the first organized battle of machines flared into desperate fury. Tymball was an omnipresent figure, shouting, directing, leaping from gun-emplacement to gun-emplacement, firing his own hand Tonite defiantly at the Palace.

Under a barrage of the heaviest fire, the Humans charged once more and pierced to the walls as the defenders fell back. An Atomo projectile smashed its way into the central tower and there was a sudden inferno of fire.

That blaze was the funeral pyre of the last of the Lhasinu in New York. The blackening walls of the palace crumbled in, in one vast crash; but to the very last, room blazing about him, face horribly cut, the Viceroy stood his ground, aiming into the thick of the besieging force. And when his semi-portable expended the last dregs of its power and expired, he heaved it out the window in a last futile gesture of defiance, and plunged into the burning Hell at his back.

Above the Palace grounds at sunset, with a yet-roaring furnace as the background, there floated the green flag of independent Earth.

New York was once more Human.

RUSSELL TYMBALL was a sorry figure when he entered the Memorial once more that night. Clothes in tatters, and bloody from head to foot from the undressed cut on his cheek, he surveyed the carnage about him with sated eyes.

Volunteer squads, occupied in removing the dead and tending to the wounded had not yet succeeded in making more than a dent in the deadly work of the rebellion.

The Memorial was an improvised hospital. There were few wounded, for energy weapons deal death; and of these

few, almost none slightly. It was a scene of indescribable confusion and the moans of the hurt and dying mingled horribly with the distant yells of celebrating war-drunk survivors.

Loara Paul Kane pushed through the crowding attendants to Tymball.

"Tell me; is it over?" Hi face was haggard.

"The beginning is. The Terrestrial Flag flies over the ruins of the Palace."

"It was horrible! The day has—has—" He shuddered and closed his eyes, "If I had known in advance, I would rather have seen Earth dehumanized and Loarism destroyed."

"Yes, it was bad. But the results might have been much more dearly bought, and yet have remained cheap at the price. Where's Sanat?"

"In the courtyard—helping with the wounded. We all are. It—it—" Again his voice failed him.

There was impatience in Tymball's eyes, and he shrugged weary shoulders, "I'm not a callous monster, but it had to be done, and as yet it is only the beginning. Today's events mean little. The uprising has taken place over most of Earth, but without the fanatic enthusiasm of the rebellion in New York. The Lhasinu aren't defeated, or anywhere near defeated; make no mistake about that. Even now the Solar Guard is flashing to Earth and the forces on the outer planets are being called back. In no time at all, the entire Lhasinuic Empire will converge upon Earth and the reckoning will be a terrible and bloody one. We must have help!"

He grasped Kane by the shoulders, and shook him roughly. "Do you understand? We must have help! Even here in New York the first flush of victory will fade by tomorrow. *We must have help!*"

"I know," said Kane tonelessly. "I'll get Sanat and he can leave today." He sighed, "If today's action was any criterion of his power as a catalyst, we may expect great events."

SANAT climbed into the little two-man cruiser half an hour later and took his seat beside Petri at the controls.

He extended his hand to Kane a last

time, "When I come back it will be with a navy behind me."

Kane grasped the young man's hand tightly, "We depend upon you, Filip." He paused and said slowly, "Good luck, Loara Filip Sanat!"

Sanat flushed with pleasure at the title as he resumed his seat once more. Petri waved and Tymball called out, "Watch out for the Solar Guard!"

The airlock clanged shut, and then, with a coughing roar, the pygmy cruiser was off into the heavens.

Tymball followed it to where it dwindled into a speck and less and then turned to Kane, "All is now in the hands of Fate. And Kane, just how was that Changing of the Flame worked? Don't tell me the Flame turned red of itself."

Kane shook his head slowly, "No! That carmine blaze was the result of opening a hidden pocket of strontium salts, originally placed there to impress the Lhasinu in case of need. The rest was chemistry."

Tymball laughed grimly, "You mean the rest was mob psychology! And the Lhasinu, I think, were impressed—and *how!*"

SPACE itself gave no warning, but the mass-detector buzzed. It buzzed peremptorily and insistently. Petri stiffened in his seat and said, "We're in none of the meteor zones."

Filip Sanat held his breath as the other turned the knob that rotated the periscope. The star-field in the visor shifted with slow dignity, and then they saw it.

It glinted in the sun like half a tiny, orange football, and Petri growled, "If they've spotted us, we're sunk."

"Lhasinuic ship?"

"Ship? That's no *ship!* That's a fifty-thousand ton battle cruiser! What in the Galaxy it's doing here, I don't know. Tymball said the Patrol had made for Earth."

Sanat's voice was calm, "That one hasn't. Can we outrace it?"

"Fat chance!" Petri's fist clenched white on the G-stick. "They're coming closer."

The words might have been a signal. The audiometer jiggled and the harsh Lhasinuic voice started from a whisper

and rose to stridence as the radio beam sharpened, "Fire reverse motors and prepare for boarding!"

Petri released the controls and shot a look at Sanat, "I'm only the chauffeur. What do you want to do? We haven't the chance of a meteor against the sun—but if you like the gamble—"

"Well," said Sanat, simply, "we're not going to surrender, are we?"

The other grinned, as the decelerating rockets blasted, "Not bad for a Loarist! Can you shoot a mounted Tonite?"

"I've never tried!"

"Well, then, learn how. Grab that little wheel over there and keep your eye on the small 'visor above. See anything?" Speed was steadily dropping and the enemy ship was approaching.

"Just stars!"

"All right, rotate the wheel—go ahead, further. Try the other direction. Do you see the ship now?"

"Yes! There it is."

"Good! Now center it. Get it where the hairlines cross, and for the sake of Sol, keep it there. Now I'm going to turn toward the lizard scum," side-rockets blasted as he spoke, "and you keep it centered."

The Lhasinuic ship was bloating steadily, and Petri's voice descended to a tense whisper, "I'm dropping our screen and lunging directly at her. It's a gamble. If they're sufficiently startled, they may drop *their* screen and shoot; and if they shoot in a hurry, they may miss."

Sanat nodded silently.

"Now the second you see the purple flash of the Tonite, pull back on the wheel. Pull back *hard*; and pull back *fast*. If you're the tiniest trifle late, we're through." He shrugged, "It's a gamble!"

With that, he slammed the G-stick forward hard and shouted, "Keep it centered!"

Acceleration pushed Sanat back gaspingly, and the wheel in his sweating hands responded reluctantly to pressure. The orange football wobbled at the center of the 'visor. He could feel his hands trembling, and that didn't help any. Eyes winced with tension.

The Lhasinuic ship was swelling terribly now, and then, from its prow, a

purple sword leaped toward them. Sanat closed his eyes and jerked backwards.

He kept his eyes closed and waited. There was no sound.

He opened them and started to his feet; for Petri, arms akimbo, was laughing down upon him.

"A beginner's own luck," he laughed. "Never held a gun before in his life and knocks out a heavy cruiser in as pretty a pink as I ever saw."

"I hit it?" gasped Sanat.

"Not on the button, but you did disable it. That's good enough. And now, just as soon as we get far enough away from the sun, we're going into hyperspace."

THE tall purple-clad figure standing by the central portview gazed longingly at the silent globe without. It was Earth, huge, gibbous, glorious.

Perhaps his thoughts were just a trifle bitter as he considered the six-month period that had just passed. It had begun with a nova-blaze. Enthusiasm kindled to white heat and spread, leaping the stellar gulfs from planet to planet as fast as the hyper-atomic beam. Squabbling governments, sudden putty before the outraged clamoring of their peoples, outfitted fleets. Enemies of centuries made sudden peace and flew under the same green flag of Earth.

Perhaps it would have been too much to expect this love-feast to continue. While it did, the Humans were irresistible. One fleet was not two parsecs from Vega itself; another had captured Luna and hovered one light-second above the Earth where Tymball's ragged revolutionaries still held on doggedly.

Filip Sanat sighed and turned at the sound of a step. White-haired Ion Smitt of the Lactonian contingent entered.

"Your face tells the story," said Sanat. Smitt shook his head, "It seems hopeless."

Sanat turned away again, "Did you know that we've gotten word from Tymball today. They're fighting on what they can filch from the Lhasinu. The lizards have captured Buenos Aires and all South America seems likely to go under their heel. They're disheartened—the Tymballists—and disgusted, and I am, too." He

whirled suddenly, "You say that our new needle-ships insure victory. Then why don't we attack?"

"Well, for one thing," the grizzled soldier planted one booted leg on the chair next to him, "the reinforcements from Santanni are not coming."

Sanat started, "I thought they were on their way. What happened?"

"The Santannian government has decided its fleet is required for home defense." A wry smile accompanied his words.

"What home defense? Why, the Lhasinu are five hundred parsecs away from them."

Smitt shrugged, "An excuse is an excuse and need not make sense. I didn't say that was the real reason."

Sanat brushed his hair back and his fingers strayed to the yellow sun upon his shoulder, "Even so! We could still fight with over a hundred ships. The enemy outnumber us two to one but with the needle ships and with Lunar Base at our backs and the rebels harrassing them in the rear—" He fell into a brooding reverie.

"You won't get them to fight, Filip. The Trantorion squadron favors retreat." His voice was suddenly savage, "Of the entire fleet, I can trust only the twenty ships of my own squadron—the Lactonian. Oh, Filip, you don't know the dirt of it—you never have known. You've won the people to the Cause, but you've never won the governments. Popular opinion forced them in, but now that they are in, they're in only for what they can get."

"I can't believe that, Smitt. With victory in their grasp—"

"Victory? Victory for whom? It is exactly over that bone that the planets are squabbling. At a secret convention of the nations, Santanni demanded control of all the Lhasinuic worlds of the Sirius sector—none of which have been reconquered as yet—and was refused. Ah, you didn't know that. Consequently, she decides that she must take care of her home defense, and withdraws her various squadrons."

Filip Sanat turned away in pain, but Ion Smitt's voice hammered on, hard, unmerciful.

"And then Trantor realizes that she hates and fears Santanni more than ever she did the Lhasinu and any day now she will withdraw *her* fleet to refrain from crippling them while her enemy's ships remain quietly and safely in port. The Human nations are falling apart," the soldier's fist came down upon the table, "like rotten cloth. It was a fool's dream to think that the selfish idiots could ever unite for any worthy purpose long."

Sanat's eyes were sudden calculating slits, "Wait a while! Things will yet work out all right, if we can only manage to seize control of Earth. Earth is the key to the whole situation." His fingers drummed upon the table edge. "Its capture would provide the vital spark. It would drum up Human enthusiasm, now lagging, to the boiling point, and the Governments,—well, they would either have to ride the wave, or be dashed to pieces."

"I know that. If we fought today, you have a soldier's word we'd be on Earth tomorrow. They realize it, too, but they won't fight."

"Then—then they must be *made* to fight. The only way they can be made to fight is to leave no alternative. They won't fight now, because they can retreat whenever they wish, but if—"

He suddenly looked up, face aglow, "You know. I haven't been out of the Loarist tunic in years. Do you suppose your clothes will fit me?"

Ion Smitt looked down upon his ample girth and grinned, "Well, they might not fit you, but they'll cover you all right. What are you thinking of doing?"

"I'll tell you. It's a terrible chance, but— Relay the following orders immediately to the Lunar Base garrison—"

THE admiral of the Lhasinuic Solar squadron was a war-scarred veteran who hated two things above all else: Humans and civilians. The combination, in the person of the tall, slender Human in ill-fitted clothing, put a scowl of dislike upon his face.

Sanat wriggled in the grasp of the two Lhasinuic soldiers. "Tell them to let go," he cried in the Vegan tongue. "I am unarmed."

"Speak," ordered the admiral in En-

glish. "They do not understand your language." Then, in Lhasinuic to the soldiers, "Shoot when I give the word."

Sanat subsided, "I came to discuss terms."

"I judged as much when you hoisted the white flag. Yet you come in a one-man cruiser from the night side of your own fleet, like a fugitive. Surely, you cannot speak for your fleet."

"I speak for myself."

"Then I give you one minute. If I am not interested by the end of that time, you will be shot." His expression was stony.

Sanat tried once more to free himself, with little success. His captors tightened their grips.

"Your situation," said the Earthman, "is this. You can't attack the Human squadron as long as they control Lunar Base without serious damage to your own fleet, and you can't risk that with a hostile Earth behind you. At the same time, I happen to know that the order from Vega is to drive the Humans from the Solar System at all costs, and that the Emperor dislikes failures."

"You have ten seconds left," said the admiral, but tell-tale red spots appeared above his eyes.

"All right, then," came the hurried response, "how's this? What if I offer you the entire Human Fleet caught in a trap?"

There was silence. Tymball went on, "What if I show you how you can take over Lunar Base, and surround the Humans?"

"Go on!" It was the first sign of interest the admiral had permitted himself.

"I am in command of one of the squadrons and I have certain powers. If you'll agree to our terms, we can have the Base deserted within twelve hours. Two ships," the Human raised two fingers impressively, "will take it."

"Interesting," said the Lhasinu, slowly, "but your motive? What is your reason for doing this?"

Sanat thrust out a surly under-lip, "That would not interest you. I have been ill-treated and deprived of my rights. Besides," his eyes glittered, "Humanity's is a lost cause, anyway. For this I shall

expect payment—ample payment. Swear to that, and the fleet is yours."

The admiral glared his contempt. "There is a Lhasinuic proverb: The Human is steadfast in nothing but his treachery. Arrange your treason, and I shall repay. I swear by the word of a Lhasinuic soldier. You may return to your ships."

With a motion, he dismissed the soldiers and then stopped them at the doorway, "But remember, I risk two ships. They mean little as far as my fleet's strength is concerned, but, nevertheless, if harm comes to a Lhasinuic head through Human treachery—" The scales on his head were stiffly erect and Sanat's eyes dropped beneath the other's cold stare.

For a long while, the admiral sat alone and motionless. Then he spat, "This Human filth! It is a disgrace even to fight them!"

THE Flagship of the Human fleet lazied one hundred miles above Luna and within it the captains of the Squadrons sat about the table and listened to Ion Smitt's shouted indictment.

"—I tell you your actions amount to treason. The battle off Vega is progressing and if the Lhasinu win, their Solar squadron will be strengthened to the point where we must retreat. And if the Humans win, our treachery here exposes their flank and renders the victory worthless. We can win, I tell you. With these new needle-ships—"

The sleepy-eyed Trantorian leader spoke up. "The needle-ships have never been tried before. We cannot risk a major battle on an experiment, when the odds are against us."

"That wasn't your original view, Porcut. You—yes, and the rest of you as well—are a cowardly traitor. Cowards! Cravens!"

A chair crashed backwards as one arose in anger and others followed. Loara Filip Sanat, from his vantage-point at the central port, from where he watched the bleak landscape of Luna below with devouring concentration, turned in alarm. But Jem Porcut raised a gnarled hand for order.

"Let's stop fencing," he said. "I represent Trantor, and I take orders only

from her. We have eleven ships here, and Space knows how many at Vega. How many has Santanni got? None! Why is she keeping them at home? Perhaps to take advantage of Trantor's preoccupation. Is there anyone who hasn't heard of her designs against us? We're not going to destroy our ships here for her benefit. Trantor will not fight! My division leaves tomorrow! Under the circumstances, the Lhasinu will be glad to let us go in peace."

Another spoke up, "And Poritta, too. The treaty of Draconis has hung like neutronium around our neck these twenty years. The imperialist planets refuse revision, and we will not fight a war which is to their interests only."

One after another, surly exclamations dinned the perpetual refrain, "Our interests are against it! We will not fight!"

And suddenly, Loara Filip Sanat smiled. He had turned away from Luna and laughed at the snarling arguers.

"Sirs," he said, "no one is leaving."

Ion Smitt sighed with relief and sank back in his chair.

"Who will stop us?" asked Porcut with disdain.

"The Lhasinu! They have just taken Lunar Base and we are surrounded."

The room was a babble of dismay. Shouting confusion held sway and then one roared above the rest, "What of the garrison?"

"The garrison had destroyed the fortifications and evacuated hours before the Lhasinu took over. The enemy met with no resistance."

The silence that followed was much more terrifying than the cries that had preceded. "Treason," whispered someone.

"Who is at the bottom of this?" One by one they approached Sanat. Fists clenched. Faces flushed. "Who did this?"

"I did," said Sanat, calmly.

A moment of stumped disbelief. "Dog!" "Pig of a Loarist!" "Tear his guts out!"

And then they shrank back at the pair of Tonite guns that appeared in Ion Smitt's fists. The burly Lactonian stepped before the younger man.

"I was in on this, too," he snarled. "You'll *have* to fight now. It is necessary to fight fire with fire sometimes and Sanat fought treason with treason."

Jem Porcut regarded his knuckles carefully and suddenly chuckled, "Well, we can't wriggle out now, so we might as well fight. Except for orders, I wouldn't mind taking a crack at the damn lizards."

The reluctant pause was followed by shamefaced shouts—proof-positive of the willingness of the rest.

In two hours, the Lhasinuic demand for surrender had been scornfully rejected and the hundred ships of the Human squadron spread outwards on the expanding surface of an imaginary sphere—the standard defense formation of a surrounded fleet—and the Battle for Earth was on.

A SPACE-BATTLE between approximately equal forces resembles in almost every detail a gigantic fencing match in which controlled shafts of deadly radiation are the rapiers and impermeable walls of etheric inertia are the shields.

The two forces advance to battle and maneuver for position. Then the pale purple of a Tonite beam lashes out in a blaze of fury against the screen of an enemy ship, and in so doing, its own screen is forced to blink out. For that one instant it is vulnerable and is a perfect target for an enemy ray, which, when loosed, renders *its* ship open to attack for the moment. In widening circles, it spreads. Each unit of the fleet, combining speed of mechanism with speed of human reaction, attempts to slip through at the crucial moment and yet maintain its own safety.

Loara Filip Sanat knew all this and more. Since his encounter with the battle cruiser on the way out from Earth, he had studied space war, and now as the battle fleets fell into line, he felt his very fingers twitch for action.

He turned and said to Smitt, "I'm going down to the big guns."

Smitt's eye was on the grand 'visor, his hand on the etherwave sender, "Go ahead, if you wish, but don't get in the way."

Sanat smiled. The captain's private elevator carried him to the gun levels, and from there it was five hundred feet through an orderly mob of gunners and engineers to Tonite One. Space is at a premium in a battleship. Sanat could

feel the crampedness of the room in which individual Humans dove-tailed their work smoothly to create the gigantic machine that was a giant dreadnaught.

He mounted the six steep steps to Tonite One and motioned the gunner away. The gunner hesitated; his eye fell upon the purple tunic, and then he saluted and backed reluctantly down the steps.

Sanat turned to the co-ordinator at the gun's visiplat, "Do you mind working with me. My speed of reaction has been tested and grouped 1-A. I have my rating card, if you'd care to see it."

The co-ordinator flushed and stammered, "No, *sir*! It's an honor to work with you, *sir*."

The amplifying system thundered, "To your stations!" and a deep silence fell in which the cold purr of machinery sounded its ominous note.

Sanat spoke to the co-ordinator in a whisper, "This gun covers a full quadrant of space, doesn't it?"

"Yes, *sir*."

"Good, see if you can locate a dreadnaught with the sign of a double sun in partial eclipse."

There was a long silence. The co-ordinator's sensitive hands were on the Wheel, delicate pressure turning it this way and that, so that the field in view on the visiplat shifted. Keen eyes scanned the ordered array of enemy ships.

"There it is," he said. "Why, it's the flagship."

"Exactly! Center that ship!"

As the Wheel turned, the space-field reeled, and the enemy flagship wobbled toward the point where the hair lines crossed. The pressure of the co-ordinator's fingers became lighter and more expert.

"Centered!" he said. Where the hair-lines crossed, the tiny oval globe remained impaled.

"Keep it that way!" ordered Sanat, grimly. "Don't lose it for a second as long as it stays in our quadrant. The enemy admiral is on that ship and we're going to get him, you and I."

The ships were getting within range of each other and Sanat felt tense. He knew it was going to be close—very close. The Humans had the edge in speed, but

the Lhasinu were two to one in numbers.

A flickering beam shot out, another, ten more.

There was a sudden blinding flash of purple intensity!

"First hit," breathed Sanat. He relaxed. One of the enemy ships drifted off helplessly, its stern a mass of fused and glowing metal.

The opposing ships were not at close grips. Shots were being exchanged at blinding speed. Twice, a purple beam showed at the extreme limits of the visiplat and Sanat realized with a queer sort of shiver down his spine that it was one of the adjacent Tonites of their own ship that was firing.

The fencing match was approaching a climax. Two flashes blazed into being, almost simultaneously, and Sanat groaned. One of the two had been a Human ship. And three times there came that disquieting hum as Atomo-engines in the lower level shot into high gear—and that meant that an enemy beam directed at their own ship had been stopped by the screen.

And always, the co-ordinator kept the enemy flagship centered. An hour passed; an hour in which six Lhasinu and four Human ships had been whiffed to destruction; an hour in which the Wheel turned fractions of a degree this way, that way; in which it swivelled on its universal socket mere hair-lines in half a dozen directions.

Sweat matted the co-ordinator's hair and got into his eyes; his fingers half-lost all sensation, but that flagship never left the ominous spot where the hair-lines crossed.

And Sanat watched; finger on trigger—watched—and waited.

Twice the flagship had glowed into purple luminosity, its guns blazing and its defensive screen down; and twice Sanat's finger had quivered on the trigger and refrained. He hadn't been quick enough.

And then Sanat rammed it home and rose to his feet tensely. The co-ordinator yelled and dropped the Wheel.

In a gigantic funeral pyre of purple-hued energy, the flagship with the Lhasinu Admiral inside had ceased to exist.

Sanat laughed. His hand went out,

and the co-ordinator's came to meet it in a firm grasp of triumph.

But the triumph did not last long enough for the co-ordinator to speak the first jubilant words that were welling up in his throat, for the visiplat burst into a purple bombshell as five Human ships detonated simultaneously at the touch of deadly energy shafts.

The amplifiers thundered, "Up screens! Cease firing! Ease into Needle formation!"

Sanat felt the deadly pall of uncertainty squeeze his throat. He knew what had happened. The Lhasinu had finally managed to set up their big guns on Lunar Base; big guns with three times the range of even the largest ship guns—big guns that could pick off Human ships with no fear of reprisal.

And so the fencing match was over, and the real battle was to start. But it was to be a real battle of a type never before fought, and Sanat knew that that was the thought in every man's mind. He could see it in their grim expressions and feel it in their silence.

It might work! And it might not!

THE Earth squadron had resumed its spherical formation and drifted slowly outwards, its offensive batteries silent. The Lhasinu swept in for the kill. Cut off from power supply as the Earthmen were, and unable to retaliate with the gigantic guns of the Lunar batteries commanding near-by space, it seemed only a matter of time before either surrender or annihilation.

The enemy Tonite beams lashed out in continuous blasts of energy and tortured screens on Human ships sparked and fluoresced under the harsh whips of radiation.

Sanat could hear the buzz of the Atomo-engines rise to a protesting squeal. Against his will, his eye flicked to the energy gauge, and the quivering needle sank as he watched, moving down the dial at perceptible speed.

The co-ordinator licked dry lips, "Do you think we'll make it, sir?"

"Certainly!" Sanat was far from feeling his expressed confidence. "We need hold out for an hour—provided they don't fall back."

And the Lhasinu weren't. To have

fallen back would have meant a thinning of the lines with a possible break-through and escape on the part of the Humans.

The Human ships were down to crawling speed—scarcely above a hundred miles an hour. Idling along, they crept up the purple beams of energy; the imaginary sphere increasing in size; the distance between the opposing forces ever narrowing.

But inside the ship, the gauge-needle was dropping rapidly, and Sanat's heart dropped with it. He crossed the gun-level to where hard-bitten soldiers waited at a gigantic and gleaming lever, in anticipation of an order that had to come soon—or never.

The distance between opponents was now only a matter of one or two miles—almost contact from the viewpoint of space warfare—and then that order shot over the shielded etheric beams from ship to ship.

It reverberated through the gun level: "Out needles!"

A score of hands reached for the lever, Sanat's among them, and jerked downwards. Majestically, the lever bent in a curving arc to the floor and as it did so, there was a vast scraping noise and a sharp thud that shook the ship.

The dreadnaught had become a "needle ship!"

At the prow, a section of armor plate had slid aside and a glittering shaft of metal had lunged outward viciously. One hundred feet long, it narrowed gracefully from a base ten feet in diameter to a needle-sharp diamond point. In the sunlight, the chrome-steel of the shaft gleamed in flaming splendor.

And every other ship of the Human squadron was likewise equipped. Each had become ten, fifteen, twenty, fifty thousand tons of driving rapier.

Swordfish of space!

Somewhere in the Lhasinuic fleet, frantic orders must have been issued. Against this oldest of all naval tactics—old even in the dim dawn of history when rival triremes had maneuvered and rammed each other to destruction with pointed prows—the super-modern equipment of a space-fleet has no defense.

Sanat forced his way to the visiplat and strapped himself into an anti-accelera-

tion seat, and he felt the springs absorb the backward jerk as the ship sprang into sudden acceleration.

He didn't bother with that, though. He wanted to watch the battle! There wasn't one here, nor anywhere in the Galaxy, that risked what he did. They risked only their lives; and he risked a dream that he had, almost single-handed, created out of nothing.

He had taken an apathetic Galaxy and driven it into revolt against the reptile. He had taken an Earth on the point of destruction and dragged it from the brink almost unaided. A Human victory would be a victory for Loara Filip Sanat and no one else.

He, and Earth, and the Galaxy were now lumped into one and thrown into the scale. And against it was weighed the outcome of this last battle, a battle hopelessly lost by his own purposeful treachery, unless the needles won.

And if they lost, the gigantic defeat—the ruin of Humanity—was also his.

The Lhasinuic ships were jumping aside but not fast enough. While they were slowly gathering momentum and drifting away, the Human ships had cut the distance by three-quarters. On the screen, a Lhasinuic ship had grown to colossal proportions. Its purple whip of energy had gone out as every ounce of power had gone into a man-killing attempt at rapid acceleration.

And nevertheless its image grew and the shining point that could be seen at the lower end of the screen aimed like a glittering javelin at its heart.

Sanat felt he could not bear the tension. Five minutes and he would take his place as the Galaxy's greatest hero—or its greatest traitor! There was a horrible, unbearable pounding of blood in his temples.

Then it came.

Contact!!

The screen went wild in a chaotic fury of twisted metal. The anti-acceleration seats shrieked as springs absorbed the shock. Things cleared slowly. The screen-view veered wildly as the ship slowly steadied. The ship's needle had broken, the jagged stump twisted awry, but the enemy vessel it had pierced was a gutted wreck.

Sanat held his breath as he scanned space. It was a vast sea of wrecked ships, and on the outskirts tattered remnants of the enemy were in flight, with Human ships in pursuit.

There was the sound of colossal cheering behind him and a pair of strong hands on his shoulders.

He turned. It was Smitt—Smitt, the veteran of five wars, with tears in his eyes.

"Filip," he said, "we've won. We've just received word from Vega. The Lhasinuic Home Fleet has been smashed—and also with the needles. The war is over, and we've won. *You've won, Filip! You!*"

His grip was painful, but Loara Filip Sanat did not mind that. For a single, ecstatic moment, he stood motionless, face transfigured.

Earth was free! Humanity was saved!



A Fiction House Magazine



The Star Mouse

By FREDRIC BROWN

**Robinson Crusoe . . . Gulliver . . . Paul Bunyan;
the story of their adventures is nothing compared to the Saga of Mitkey.**

MITKEY, the mouse, wasn't Mitkey then.

He was just another mouse, who lived behind the floorboards and plaster of the house of the great Herr Professor Oberburger, formerly of Vienna and Heidelberg; then a refugee from the excessive admiration of more powerful of his fellow-countrymen. The excessive admiration had concerned, not Herr Oberburger himself, but a certain gas which had been a by-product of an unsuccessful rocket fuel—which might have been a highly-successful something else.

If, of course, the Professor had given them the correct formula. Which he—Well, anyway, the Professor had made good his escape and now lived in a house in Connecticut. And so did Mitkey.

A small gray mouse, and a small gray man. Nothing unusual about either of them. Particularly there was nothing unusual about Mitkey; he had a family and he liked cheese and if there were Rotarians among mice, he would have been a Rotarian.

The Herr Professor, of course, had his mild eccentricities. A confirmed bachelor, he had no one to talk to except himself, but he considered himself an excellent conversationalist and held constant verbal communion with himself while he worked. That fact, it turned out later, was important, because Mitkey had excellent ears and heard those night-long soliloquies. He didn't understand them, of course. If he thought about them at all, he merely thought of the Professor as a large and noisy super-mouse who squeaked over-much.

"Und now," he would say to himself, "ve vill see vether this eggshaust tube vas properly machined. It should fidt vithin

vun vun-hundredth thousandth uf an indtch. Ahhh, it iss perfect. Und now—"

Night after night, day after day, month after month. The gleaming thing grew, and the gleam in Herr Oberburger's eyes grew apace.

It was about three and a half feet long, with weirdly shaped vanes, and it rested on a temporary framework on a table in the center of the room that served the Herr Professor for all purposes. The house in which he and Mitkey lived was a four room structure, but the Professor hadn't yet found it out, seemingly. Originally, he had planned to use the big room as a laboratory only, but he found it more convenient to sleep on a cot in one corner of it, when he slept at all, and to do the little cooking he did over the same gas burner over which he melted down golden grains of TNT into a dangerous soup which he salted and peppered with strange condiments, but did not eat.

"Und now I shall bour it into tubes, und see vether vun tube adjacendt to another eggsploides der secondt tube vhen der virst tube iss—"

That was the night Mitkey almost decided to move himself and his family to a more stable abode, one that did not rock and sway and try to turn handsprings on its foundations. But Mitkey didn't move after all, because there were compensations. New mouse-holes all over, and—joy of joy!—a big crack in the back of the refrigerator where the Professor kept, among other things, food.

Of course the tubes had been not larger than capillary size, or the house would not have remained around the mouse-holes. And of course Mitkey could not guess what was coming nor understand the Herr Professor's brand of English (nor any



"NOT DER
MOON OR
BUST, BUT
DER MOON/
UND BUST!"

Illustrated by Lynch

other brand of English, for that matter) or he would not have let even a crack in the refrigerator tempt him.

The Professor was jubilant that morning.

"Der fuel, idt vorks! Der secondt tube, ldt did not eggsplode. Und der virst, in seggtions, as I had eggspectedt! Und it is more bowerful; there will be blenty of room for der combartment—"

Ah, yes, the compartment. That was where Mitkey came in, although even the Professor didn't know it yet. In fact the Professor didn't even know that Mitkey existed.

"Und now," he was saying to his favorite listener, "idt is budt a madter of combining der fuel tubes so they work in obbosite bairs. Und then—"

That was the moment when the Herr Professor's eyes first fell on Mitkey. Rather, they fell upon a pair of gray whiskers and a black, shiny little nose

protruding from a hole in the baseboards.

"Vell!" he said, "vot haff ve here! Mitkey Mouse himself! Mitkey, how would you like to go for a ride, negst veek? Ve shall see."

THAT is how it came about that the next time the Professor sent into town for supplies, his order included a mousetrap—not one of the vicious kind that kills, but one of the wire-cage kind. And it had not been set, with cheese, for more than ten minutes before Mitkey's sharp little nose had smelled out that cheese and he had followed his nose into captivity.

Not, however, an unpleasant captivity. Mitkey was an honored guest. The cage reposed now on the table at which the Professor did most of his work, and cheese in indigestion-giving abundance was pushed through the bars, and the Professor didn't talk to himself any more.

"You see, Mitkey, I was going to sendt to der laboratory in Hardtford for a white mouse, budt vhy should I, mit you here? I am sure you are more soundt und healthy und able to vithstand a long chourney than those laboratory mices. No? Ah, you viggel your viskers und that means yes, no? Und being used to living in dargk holes, you should suffer less than they from glaustrophobia, no?"

And Mitkey grew fat and happy and forgot all about trying to get out of the cage. I fear that he even forgot about the family he had abandoned, but he knew, if he knew anything, that he need not worry about them in the slightest. At least not until and unless the Professor discovered and repaired the hole in the refrigerator. And the Professor's mind was most emphatically not on refrigerators.

"Und so, Mitkey, ve shall place this vane so—it iss only of assistance in der landing, in an atmosphere. It und these vill bring you down safely und slowly enough that der shock-absorbers in der movable combartment vill keep you from bumping your head too hard, I think." Of course, Mitkey missed the ominous note to that "I think" qualification because he missed all the rest of it. He did not, as has been explained, speak English. Not then.

But Herr Oberburger talked to him just the same. He showed him pictures. "Did you effer see der Mouse you vas named after, Mitkey? Vhat? No? Loogk, this is der original Mitkey Mouse, by Valt Disney. Budt I think you are cuter, Mitkey."

Probably the Professor was a bit crazy to talk that way to a little gray mouse. In fact, he must have been crazy to make a rocket that worked. For the odd thing was that the Herr Professor was not really an inventor. There was, as he carefully explained to Mitkey, not one single thing about that rocket that was *new*. The Herr Professor was a technician; he could take other people's ideas and make them work. His only real invention—the rocket fuel that wasn't one—had been turned over to the United States Government and had proved to be something already known and discarded because it was too expensive for practical use.

AS he explained very carefully to Mitkey, "It iss burely a matter of absolute accuracy and mathematical correctness, Mitkey. Idt iss all here—ve merely combine—and ve achieff vhat, Mitkey?"

"Eggscape velocity, Mitkey! Chust barely, it adds up to eggscape velocity. Maybe. There are yet unknown facgtors, Mitkey, in der upper atmosphere, der troposphere, der stratosphere. Ve think ve know eggsactly how much air there iss to calculate resistance against, but are ve absolutely sure? No, Mitkey, ve are not. Ve haff not been there. Und der marchin iss so narrow that so much as an air current might affect idt."

But Mitkey cared not a whit. In the shadow of the tapering aluminum-alloy cylinder he waxed fat and happy.

"Der tag, Mitkey, der tag! Und I shall not lie to you, Mitkey. I shall not giff you valse assurances. You go on a dancherous chourney, mein little friendt.

"A vifty-vifty chance ve giff you, Mitkey. Not der moon or bust, but der moon *und* bust, or else maybe safely back to earth. You see, my boor little Mitkey, der moon iss not made of green cheese und if it were, you would not live to eat it because there iss not enough atmosphere to bring you down safely und vith your viskers still on.

"Und vhy then, you may vell ask, do I send you? Because der rocket may *not* attain eggscape velocity. Und in that case, it iss still an eggperiment, budt a different vun. Der rocket, if it goes not to der moon, falls back on der earth, no? Und in that case certain instruments shall giff us further information than ve haff yet about things up there in space. Und you shall giff us information, by vether or not you are yet alife, vether der shock absorbers und vanes are sufficient in an earth-equivalent atmosphere. You see?"

"Then ladter, when ve send rockets to Venus maybe vhere an atmosphere eggists, ve shall haff data to calculate the needed size of vanes und shock-absorbers, no? Und in either case, und vether or not you return, Mitkey, you shall be vamous! You shall be der virst liffig greature to go oudt beyond der stratosphere of der earth, out into space.

"Mitkey, you shall be der Star-Mouse!

I enfy you, Mitkey, and I only vish I vere your size, so I could go, too."

Der tag, and the door to the compartment. "Gootbye, little Mitkey Mouse." Darkness. Silence. Noise!

"Der rocket—if it goes not to der moon—falls back on der earth, no?" That was what the Herr Professor thought. But the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley. Even star-mice.

All because of Prxl.

THE Herr Professor found himself very lonely. After having had Mitkey to talk to, soliloquies were somehow empty and adequate.

There may be some who say that the company of a small gray mouse is a poor substitute for a wife; but others may disagree. And, anyway, the Professor had never had a wife, and he *had* a mouse to to talk to, so he missed one and, if he missed the other, he didn't know it.

During the long night after the launching of the rocket, he had been very busy with his telescope, a sweet little eight-inch reflector, checking its course as it gathered momentum. The exhaust explosions made a tiny fluctuating point of light that was possible to follow, if one knew where to look.

But the following day there seemed to be nothing to do, and he was too excited to sleep, although he tried. So he compromised by doing a spot of housekeeping, cleaning the pots and pans. It was while he was so engaged that he heard a series of frantic little squeaks and discovered that another small gray mouse, with shorter whiskers and a shorter tail than Mitkey, had walked into the wire-cage mousetrap.

"Vell, vell," said the Professor, "vot haff ve here? Minnie? Iss it Minnie come to look for her Mitkey?"

The Professor was not a biologist, but he happened to be right. It *was* Minnie. Rather, it was Mitkey's mate, so the name was appropriate. What strange vagary of mind had induced her to walk into an unbaited trap, the Professor neither knew nor cared, but he was delighted. He promptly remedied the lack of bait by pushing a sizable piece of cheese through the bars.

Thus it was that Minnie came to fill the place of her far-traveling spouse as reposi-

tory for the Professor's confidences. Whether she worried about her family or not there is no way of knowing, but she need not have done so. They were now large enough to fend for themselves, particularly in a house that offered abundant cover and easy access to the refrigerator.

"Ah, and now it iss dargk enough, Minnie, that ve can loogk for that husband of yours. His viery trail across the sky. True, Minnie, it iss a very small viery trail und der astronomers vill not notice it, because they do not know where to loogk. But ve do.

"He iss going to be a very vamous mouse, Minnie, this Mitkey of ours, when ve tell der world about him und about mein rocket. You see, Minnie ve haff not told them yet. Ve shall vait und giff der gocomplete story all at vunce. By dawn of tomorrow ve'll—

"Ah, there he iss, Minnie! Vaint, but there. I'd hold you up to der scope und let you loogk, but it vould not be vocused right for your eyes, und I do not know how to—

"Almost vun hundred thousand miles, Minnie, und still agcelerating, but not for much longer. Our Mitkey iss on schedule; in fagt he iss going vaster than ve had vigured, no? It iss sure now that he vill eggscape the gravitation of der earth, und fall upon der moon!"

Of course, it was purely coincidental that Minnie squeaked.

"Ah, yess, Minnie, little Minnie. I know, I know. Ve shall neffer see our Mitkey again, und I almost vish our egg-speriment hadt vailed. Budt there are gompensations, Minnie. He shall be der most vamous of all mices. Der Star-Mouse! Virst lifing greature effer to go beyond der gravitational bull of earth!"

The night was long. Occasionally high clouds obscured vision.

"Minnie, I shall make you more comfortable than in that so-small vire cage. You vould like to seem to be vree, vould you not, vithout bars, like der animals at modern zoos, vith moats insteadt?"

AND so, to fill in an hour when a cloud obscured the sky, the Herr Professor made Minnie her new home. It was the end of a wooden crate, about half an inch thick and a foot square, laid

flat on the table, and with no visible barrier around it.

But he covered the top with metal foil at the edges, and he placed the board on another larger board which also had a strip of metal foil surrounding the island of Minnie's home. And wires from the two areas of metal foil to opposite terminals of a small transformer which he placed near by.

"Und now, Minnie, I shall blace you on your island, which shall be liberally supplied mitt cheese und vater, und you shall vind it iss an egcelent blace to liff. But you vill get a mild shock or two when you try to step off der edge of der island. It vill not hurt much, but you vill not like it, und after a few tries you vill learn not to try again, no? Und—"

And night again.

Minnie happy on her island, her lesson well learned. She would no longer so much as step on the inner strip of metal foil. It was a mouse-paradise of an island, though. There was a cliff of cheese bigger than Minnie herself. It kept her busy. Mouse and cheese; soon one would be a transmutation of the other.

But Professor Oberburger wasn't thinking about that. The Professor was worried. When he had calculated and recalculated and aimed his eight-inch reflector through the hole in the roof and turned out the lights—

Yes, there *are* advantages to being a bachelor after all. If one wants a hole in the roof, one simply knocks a hole in the roof and there is nobody to tell one that one is crazy. If winter comes, or if it rains, one can always call a carpenter or use a tarpaulin.

But the faint trail of light wasn't there. The Professor frowned and re-calculated and re-re-calculated and shifted his telescope three-tenths of a minute and still the rocket wasn't there.

"Minnie, something iss wrong. Either der tubes haff stopped viring, or—"

Or the rocket was no longer traversing a straight line relative to its point of departure. By straight, of course, is meant parabolically curved relative to everything other than velocity.

So the Herr Professor did the only thing remaining for him to do, and began to search, with the telescope, in widening



circles. It was two hours before he found it, five degrees off course already and veering more and more into a— Well, there was only one thing you could call it. A tailspin.

The darned thing was going in circles, circles which appeared to constitute an orbit about something that couldn't possibly be there. Then narrowing into a concentric spiral.

Then—out. Gone. Darkness. No rocket flares.

The Professor's face was pale as he turned to Minnie.

"It iss *impossible*, Minnie. Mein own eyes, but it could not be. Even if vun side stopped viring, it could not haff gone into such sudden circles." His pencil verified a suspicion. "Und, Minnie, it decelerated vaster than possible. Even mitt *no* tubes viring, its momentum vould haff been more—"

The rest of the night—telescope and calculus—yielded no clue. That is, no believable clue. Some force not inherent in the rocket itself, and not accountable by gravitation—even of a hypothetical body—had acted.

"Mein poor Mitkey."

The gray, inscrutable dawn. "Mein Minnie, it vill haff to be a secret. Ve dare not publish vhat ve saw, for it vould not be believed. I am not sure I believe it myself, Minnie. Berhaps because I vas

offertired vrom not sleeping, I chust imachined that I saw—"

Later. "But, Minnie, ve shall hope. Vun hundred vifty thousand miles out, it vas. It vill fall back upon der earth. But I gannot tell where! I thought that if it did, I would be able to calculate its course, und— But after those goncentric cirgles—Minnie, not even *Einstein* could calculate where it vill land. Not effen *me*. All ve can do iss hope that ve shall hear of where it falls."

Cloudy day. Black night jealous of its mysteries.

"Minnie, our poor Mitkey. There iss *nothing* could have gauzed—"

But something had.

Prxl.

Prxl is an asteroid. It isn't called that by earthly astronomers, because—for excellent reasons—they have not discovered it. So we will call it by the nearest possible transliteration of the name its inhabitants use. Yes, it's inhabited.

Come to think of it, Professor Oberburger's attempt to send a rocket to the moon had some strange results. Or rather, Prxl did.

You wouldn't think that an asteroid could reform a drunk, would you? But one Charles Winslow, a besotted citizen of Bridgeport, Connecticut, never took a drink when—right on Grove Street—a mouse, asked him the road to Hartford. The mouse was wearing bright red pants and vivid yellow gloves—

But that was fifteen months after the Professor lost his rocket. We'd better start over again.

PRXL is an asteroid. One of those despised celestial bodies which terrestrial astronomers call vermin of the sky, because the darned things leave trails across the plates that clutter up the more important observations of novae and nebulae. Fifty thousand fleas on the dark dog of night.

Tiny things, most of them. Astronomers have been discovering recently that some of them come close to Earth. Amazingly close. There was excitement in 1932 when Amor came within ten million miles; astronomically, a mere mashie shot. Then Apollo cut that almost in half, and in

1936 Adonis came within less than one and a half million miles.

In 1937, Hermes, less than half a million but the astronomers got really excited when they calculated its orbit and found that the little mile-long asteroid *can* come within a mere 220,000 miles, closer than Earth's own moon.

Some day they may be still more excited, if and when they spot the $\frac{3}{8}$ -mile asteroid Prxl, that obstacle of space, making a transit across the moon and discover that it frequently comes within a mere hundred thousand miles of our rapidly whirling world.

Only in event of a transit will they ever discover it, though, for Prxl does not reflect light. It hasn't, anyway, for several million years since its inhabitants coated it with a black, light-absorbing pigment derived from its interior. Monumental task, painting a world, for creatures half an inch tall. But worth it, at the time. When they'd shifted its orbit, they were safe from their enemies. There were giants in those days—eight-inch tall marauding pirates from Diemos. Got to Earth a couple of times too, before they faded out of the picture. Pleasant little giants who killed because they enjoyed it. Records in now-buried cities on Diemos might explain what happened to the dinosaurs. And why the promising Cro-Magnons disappeared at the height of their promise only a cosmic few minutes after the dinosaurs went west.

But Prxl survived. Tiny world no longer reflecting the sun's rays, lost to the cosmic killers when its orbit was shifted.

Prxl. Still civilized, with a civilization millions of years old. Its coat of blackness preserved and renewed regularly, more through tradition than fear of enemies in these later degenerate days. Mighty but stagnant civilization, standing still on a world that whizzes like a bullet.

And Mitkey Mouse.

KLARLOTH, head scientist of a race of scientists, tapped his assistant Bemj on what would have been Bemj's shoulder if he had had one. "Look," he said, "what approaches Prxl. Obviously artificial propulsion."

Bemj looked into the wall-plate and then directed a thought-wave at the mechanism

that jumped the magnification of a thousand-fold through an alteration of the electronic field.

The image leaped, blurred, then steadied. "Fabricated," said Bemj. "Extremely crude, I must say. Primitive explosive-powered rocket. Wait, I'll check where it came from."

He took the readings from the dials about the viewplate, and hurled them as thoughts against the psychocoil of the computer, then waited while that most complicated of machines digested all the factors and prepared the answer. Then, eagerly, he slid his mind into rapport with its projector. Klarloth likewise listened in to the silent broadcast.

Exact point on Earth and exact time of departure. Untranslatable expression of curve of trajectory, and point on that curve where deflected by gravitational pull of Prxl. The destination—or rather the original intended destination—of the rocket was obvious, Earth's moon. Time and place of arrival on Prxl if present course of rocket was unchanged.

"Earth," said Klarloth meditatively. "They were a long way from rocket travel the last time we checked them. Some sort of a crusade, or battle of beliefs, going on, wasn't there?"

Bemj nodded. "Catapults. Bows and arrows. They've taken a long stride since, even if this is only an early experimental thing of a rocket. Shall we destroy it before it gets here?"

Klarloth shook his head thoughtfully. "Let's look it over. May save us a trip to Earth; we can judge their present state of development pretty well from the rocket itself."

"But then we'll have to—"

"Of course. Call the Station. Tell them to train their attracto-repulsors on it and to swing it into a temporary orbit until they prepare a landing-cradle. And not forget to damp out the explosive before they bring it down."

"Temporary force-field around point of landing—in case?"

"Naturally."

So despite the almost complete absence of atmosphere in which the vanes could have functioned, the rocket came down safely and so softly that Mitkey, in the

dark compartment, knew only that the awful noise had stopped.

Mitkey felt better. He ate some more of the cheese with which the compartment was liberally provided. Then he resumed trying to gnaw a hole in the inch-thick wood with which the compartment was lined. That wooden lining was a kind thought of the Herr Professor for Mitkey's mental well-being. He knew that trying to gnaw his way out would give Mitkey something to do en route which would keep him from getting the screaming ineamies. The idea had worked; being busy, Mitkey hadn't suffered mentally from his dark confinement. And now that things were quiet, he chewed away more industriously and more happily than ever, sublimely unaware that when he got through the wood, he'd find only metal which he couldn't chew. But better people than Mitkey have found things they couldn't chew.

Meanwhile, Klarloth and Bemj and several thousand other Prxlians stood gazing up at the huge rocket which, even lying on its side, towered high over their heads. Some of the younger ones, forgetting the invisible field of force, walked too close and came back, ruefully rubbing bumped heads.

Klarloth himself was at the psychograph.

"There is life inside the rocket," he told Bemj. "But the impressions are confused. One creature, but I cannot follow its thought processes. At the moment it seems to be doing something with its teeth."

"It could not be an Earthling, one of the dominant race. One of them is much larger than this huge rocket. Gigantic creatures. Perhaps, unable to construct a rocket large enough to hold one of themselves, they sent an experimental creature, such as our wooraths."

"I believe you've guessed right, Bemj. Well, when we have explored its mind thoroughly, we may still learn enough to save us a check-up trip to Earth. I am going to open the door."

"But air—creatures of Earth would need a heavy, almost a dense atmosphere. It could not live."

"We retain the force-field, of course. It will keep the air in. Obviously there is a

source of supply of air within the rocket or the creature would not have survived the trip."

Klarloth operated controls, and the force-field itself put forth invisible pseudopods and turned the outer screw-door, then reached within and unlatched the inner door to the compartment itself.

ALL Prxl watched breathlessly as a monstrous gray head pushed out of the huge aperture yawning overhead. Thick whiskers, each as long as the body of a Prxlian—

Mitkey jumped down, and took a forward step that bumped his black nose hard—into something that wasn't there. He squeaked, and jumped backwards against the rocket.

There was disgust in Bemj's face as he looked up at the monster. "Obviously much less intelligent than a woorath. Might just as well turn on the ray."

"Not at all," interrupted Klarloth. "You forget certain very obvious facts. The creature is unintelligent, of course, but the subconscious of every animal holds in itself every memory, every impression, every sense-image, to which it has ever been subjected. If this creature has ever heard the speech of the Earthlings, or seen any of their works—besides this rocket—every word and every picture is indelibly graven. You see now what I mean?"

"Naturally. How stupid of me, Klarloth. Well, one thing is obvious from the rocket itself: we have nothing to fear from the science of Earth for at least a few millenia. So there is no hurry, which is fortunate. For to send back the creature's memory to the time of its birth, and to follow each sensory impression in the psychograph will require—well, a time at least equivalent to the age of the creature, whatever that is,



plus the time necessary for us to interpret and assimilate each."

"But that will not be necessary, Bemj."

"No? Oh, you mean the X-19 waves?"

"Exactly. Focused upon this creature's brain-center, they can, without disturbing his memories, be so delicately adjusted as to increase his intelligence—now probably about .0001 in the scale—to the point where he is a reasoning creature. Almost automatically, during the process, he will assimilate his own memories, and understand them just as he would if he had been intelligent at the time he received those impressions.

"See, Bemj? He will automatically sort out irrelevant data, and will be able to answer our questions."

"But would you make him as intelligent as—?"

"As we? No, the X-19 waves would not work so far. I would say to about .2 on the scale. That, judging from the rocket coupled with what we remember of Earthlings from our last trip there, is about their present place on the intelligence scale."

"Ummm, yes. At that level, he would comprehend his experiences on Earth just sufficiently that he would not be dangerous to us, too. Equal to an intelligent Earthling. Just about right for our purpose. Then, shall we teach him our language?"

"Wait," said Klarloth. He studied the psychograph closely for a while. "No, I do not think so. He will have a language of his own. I see in his subconscious, memories of many long conversations. Strangely, they all seem to be monologues by one person. But he will have a language—a simple one. It would take him a long time, even under treatment, to grasp the concepts of our own method of communication. But we can learn his, while he is under the X-19 machine, in a few minutes."

"Does he understand, now, any of that language?"

Klarloth studied the psychograph again. "No, I do not believe he— Wait, there is one word that seems to mean something to him. The word 'Mitkey.' It seems to be his name, and I believe that, from hearing it many times, he vaguely associates it with himself."

"And quarters for him—with air-locks and such?"

"Of course. Order them built."

V

TO say it was a strange experience for Mitkey is understatement. Knowledge is a strange thing, even when it is acquired gradually. To have it thrust upon one—

And there were little things that had to be straightened out. Like the matter of vocal chords. His weren't adapted to the language he now found he knew. Bemj fixed that; you would hardly call it an operation because Mitkey—even with his new awareness—didn't know what was going on, and he was wide awake at the time. And they didn't explain to Mitkey about the J-dimension with which one can get at the inwardness of things without penetrating the outside.

They figured things like that weren't in Mitkey's line, and anyway they were more interested in learning from him than teaching him. Bemj and Klarloth, and a dozen others deemed worthy of the privilege. If one of them wasn't talking to him, another was.

Their questioning helped his own growing understanding. He would not, usually, know that he knew the answer to a question until it was asked. Then he'd piece together, without knowing just how he did it (any more than you or I know *how* we know things) and give them the answer.

Bemj: "Iss this language which you sbeak a universal vun?"

And Mitkey, even though he'd never thought about it before, had the answer ready: "No, it iss nodt. It iss Englitch, but I remember der Herr Brofessor sbeaking of other tongues. I belieff he sboke another himself originally, budt in American he always sboke Englitch to become more vamilair mitt it. It iss a beaudiful sbeech, is it nodt?"

"Hmmm," said Bemj.

Klarloth: "Und your race, the mices. Are they treated vell?"

"Nodt by most people," Mitkey told him. And explained.

"I would like to do something for them," he added. "Loogk, could I nodt take back

mitt me this process which you used upon me? Abbylly it to other mices, und greate a race of super-mices?"

"Vhy not?" asked Bemj.

He saw Klarloth looking at him strangely, and threw his mind into rapport with the chief scientist's, with Mitkey left out of the silent communion.

"Yes, of course," Bemj told Klarloth, "it will lead to trouble on Earth, grave trouble. Two equal classes of beings so dissimilar as mice and men cannot live together in amity. But why should that concern us, other than favorably? The resultant mess will slow down progress on Earth—give us a few more millennia of peace before Earthlings discover we are here, and trouble starts. You know these Earthlings."

"But you would give them the X-19 waves? They might—"

"No, of course not. But we can explain to Mitkey here how to make a very crude and limited machine for them. A primitive one which would suffice for nothing more than the specific task of converting mouse mentality from .0001 to .2, Mitkey's own level and that of the bifurcated Earthlings."

"It is possible," communicated Klarloth. "It is certain that for aeons to come they will be incapable of understanding its basic principle."

"But could they not use even a crude machine to raise their own level of intelligence?"

"You forget, Bemj, the basic limitation of the X-19 rays; that no one can possibly design a projector capable of raising any mentality to a point on the scale higher than his own. Not even we."

All this, of course, over Mitkey's head, in silent Prxlian.

More interviews, and more.

Klarloth again: "Mitkey, ve varn you of vun thing. Avoid carelessness vith electricity. Der new molecular rearranchement of your brain center—it iss unstable, und—"

Bemj: "Mitkey, are you sure your Herr Brofessor iss der most advanced of all who eggspériment vith der rockets?"

"In cheneral, yess, Bemj. There are others who on vun specific boint, such as eggsplosives, mathematics, astrovisics, may know more, but not much more. Und for

combining these knowledges, he iss ahead."

"It iss vell," said Bemj.

SMALL gray mouse towering like a dinosaur over tinier half-inch Prxlians. Meek, herbivorous creature though he was, Mitkey could have killed any one of them with a single bite. But, of course, it never occurred to him to do so, nor to them to fear that he might.

They turned him inside out mentally. They did a pretty good job of study on him physically, too, but that was through the J-dimension, and Mitkey didn't even know about it.

They found out what made him tick, and they found out everything he knew and some things he didn't even know he knew. And they grew quite fond of him.

"Mitkey," said Klarloth one day, "all der civilized races on Earth veer glothing, do they not? Vell, if you are to raise der level of mices to men, vould it not be vitting that you veer glothes, too?"

"An eggcelent idea, Herr Klarloth. Und I know chust vhat kind I vould like. Der Herr Brofessor vunce showed me a picture of a mouse bainted by der artist Dissney, und der mouse vore glothing. Der mouse vas not a real-life vun, budt an imachinary mouse in a barable, und der Brofessor named me after der Dissney mouse,"



"Vot kind of glothing vas it, Mitkey?"

That was on the eve of Mitkey's de-

"Bright red bants mitt two big yellow buttons in frondt und two in back, und yellow shoes for der back feet und a pair of yellow gloves for der vront. A hole in der seat of der bants to aggomodate der tail."

"Ogay, Mitkey. Such shall be ready for you in fife minutes."

parture. Originally, Bemj had suggested awaiting the moment when Prxl's eccentric orbit would again take it within a hundred and fifty thousand miles of Earth. But, as Klarloth pointed out, that would be fifty-five Earth-years ahead, and Mitkey wouldn't last that long. Not unless they— And Bemj agreed that they had better not risk sending a secret like that back to Earth.

So they compromised by refueling Mitkey's rocket with something that would cancel out the million and a quarter odd miles he would have to travel. That secret they didn't have to worry about, because the fuel would be gone by the time the rocket landed.

Day of departure.

"Ve haff done our best, Mitkey, to set und time der rocket so it vill land on or near der spot from which you left Earth. But you gannot eggsspect agguracy in a voyach so long as this. But you vill land near. The rest iss up to you. Ve haff equippid the rocket ship for effery contingency."

"Thank you, Herr Klarloth, Herr Bemj. Gootbye."

"Gootbye, Mitkey. Ve hate to loose you."

"Gootbye, Mitkey."

"Gootbye, gootbye . . ."

VI

FOR a million and a quarter miles, the aim was really excellent. The rocket landed in Long Island Sound, ten miles out from Bridgeport, about sixty miles from the house of Professor Oberburger near Hartford.

They had prepared for a water landing, of course. The rocket went down to the bottom, but before it was more than a few dozen feet under the surface, Mitkey opened the door—especially re-

equipped to open from the inside—and stepped out.

Over his regular clothes he wore a neat little diving suit that would have protected him at any reasonable depth, and which, being lighter than water, brought him to the surface quickly where he was able to open his helmet.

He had enough synthetic food to last him for a week, but it wasn't necessary, as things turned out. The night-boat from Boston carried him in to Bridgeport on its anchor chain, and once in sight of land he was able to divest himself of the diving suit and let it sink to the bottom after he'd punctured the tiny compartments that made it float, as he'd promised Klarloth he would do.

Almost instinctively, Mitkey knew that he'd do well to avoid human beings until he'd reached Professor Oberburger and told his story. His worst danger proved to be the rats at the wharf where he swam ashore. They were ten times Mitkey's size and had teeth that could have taken him apart in two bites.

But mind has always triumphed over matter. Mitkey pointed an imperious yellow glove and said, "Scram," and the rats scrambled. They'd never seen anything like Mitkey before, and they were impressed.

So for that matter, was the drunk of whom Mitkey inquired the way to Hartford. We mentioned that episode before. That was the only time Mitkey tried direct communication with strange human beings. He took, of course, every precaution. He addressed his remarks from a strategic position only inches away from a hole into which he could have popped. But it was the drunk who did the popping, without even waiting to answer Mitkey's question.

But he got there, finally. He made his way afoot to the north side of town and hid out behind a gas station until he heard a motorist who had pulled in for gasoline inquire the way to Hartford. And Mitkey was a stowaway when the car started up.

The rest wasn't hard. The calculations of the Prxlians showed that the starting point of the rocket was five Earth miles north-west of what showed on their telescopomaps as a city, and which from the



Professor's conversation Mitkey knew would be Hartford.

He got there.

VII

"HELLO, Brofessor."

The Herr Professor Oberburger looked up, startled. There was no one in sight. "Vot?" he asked, of the air. "Who iss?"

"It iss I, Brofessor. Mitkey, der mouse whom you sent to der moon. But I was not there. Insteadt, I—"

"Vot?? It iss impossible. Somebody blays der choke. Budt—budt nobody *knows* about that rocket. When it vailed, I didn't told nobody. Nobody budt me knows—"

"And me, Brofessor."

The Herr Professor sighed heavily. "Offerwork. I am going vhat they call battly in der bel—"

"No, Brofessor. This is really me, Mitkey. I can talk now. Chust like you."

"You say you can— I do not belief it. Vhy can I not see you, then. Where are you? Vhy don't you—"

"I am hiding, Brofessor, in der vall chust behind der big hole. I vanted to be sure efferthing vas ogay before I showed myself. Then you vould not get eggcited und throw something at me maybe."

"Vot? Vhy, Mitkey, if it iss really you und I am nodt asleep or going— Vhy, Mitkey, you know better than to think I might do something like that!"

"Ogay, Brofessor."

Mitkey stepped out of the hole in the wall, and the Professor looked at him and rubbed his eyes and looked again and rubbed his eyes and—

"I am grazy," he said finally. "Red bants he vears yet, und yellow— It gan-not be. I *am* grazy."

"No, Brofessor. Lister, I'll tell you all aboutt"

And Mitkey told him.

Gray dawn, and a small gray mouse still talking earnestly.

"But, Mitkey—"

"Yess, Brofessor. I see your boint, that you think an intelligent race of mices und an intelligent race of men couldt nodt get along side by sides. But it vould not be side by sides; as I said, there are only a ferry few beople in the smallest continent of Australia. Und it vould cost little to bring them back und turn offer that continent to us mices. Ve vould call it Moustralia instead Australia, und ve vould instead of Sydney call der capital Dissney, in honor of—"

"But, Mitkey—"

"But, Brofessor, look vot ve offer for that continent. *All* mices vould go there. Ve civilize a few und the few help us catch others und bring them in to put them under der ray machine, und the others help catch more under build more machines und it grows like a snowball rolling down hill. Und ve sign a non-aggression pact mitt humans und stay on Moustralia und raise our own food und—"

"But, Mitkey—"

"Und look vot ve offer you in eggs-change, Herr Brofessor! Ve vill eggsterminate your vorst enemy—der *rats*. Ve do not like them either. Und vun battalion of vun thousand mices, armed mitt gas masks und small gas bombs could go right in effery hole after der rats und could eggsterminate effery rat in a city in vun day or two. In der whole vorld ve could eggsterminate effery last rat in a year, und at the same time catch und civilize effery mouse und ship him to Moustralia, und—"

"But, Mitkey—"

"Vot, Brofessor?"

"It vould vork, but it vould dnot work. You could eggsterminate der rats, yess. But how long vould it be before conflicts of interests vould lead to der mices trying to eggsterminate der people or der people trying to eggsterminate der—"

"They vould not dare, Brofessor! Ve could make veapons that vould—"

"You see, Mitkey?"



"GOOTBYE, MITKEY"

"But it vould not habben. If men vill honor our rights, ve vill honor—"

The Herr Brofessor sighed.

"I—I vill act as your intermediary, Mitkey, und offer your broposition, und—Vell, it iss true that getting rid of rats vould be a greadt boon to der human race. Budt—"

"Thank you, Brofessor."

"By der vay, Mitkey. I haff Minnie. Your vife, I guess it iss, unless there vas other mices around. She iss in der other room; I put her there chust before you arrified, so she vould be in der dark und could sleep. You vant to see her?"

"Vife?" said Mitkey. It had been so long that he had really forgotten the family he had perforce abandoned. The memory returned slowly.

"Vell," he said "—ummm, yess. Ve vill get her und I shall construct quvick a small X-19 propector und—Yess, it vill help you in your negotiations mitt der governments if there are sefferal of us already so they can see I am not chust a freak like they might otherwise suspegt."

VII

IT wasn't deliberate. It couldn't have been, because the Professor didn't know about Klarloth's warning to Mitkey

about carelessness with electricity—"Der new molecular rearrangement of your brain center—it iss unstable, und—"

And the Professor was still back in the lighted room when Mitkey ran into the room where Minnie was in her barless cage. She was asleep, and the sight of her— Memory of his earlier days came back like a flash and suddenly Mitkey knew how lonesome he had been.

"Minnie!" he called, forgetting that she could not understand.

And stepped up on the board where she lay. "Squeak!" The mild electrical current between the two strips of tinfoil got him.

There was silence for a while.

Then: "Mitkey," called the Herr Professor. "Come on back und ve vill discuss this—"

He stepped through the doorway and saw them, there in the gray light of dawn, two small gray mice cuddled happily together. He couldn't tell which was which, because Mitkey's teeth had torn off the red and yellow garments which had suddenly been strange, confining and obnoxious things.

"Vot on earth?" asked Professor Oberburger. Then he remembered the current, and guessed.

"Mitkey! Can you no longer talk? Iss der—"

Silence.

Then the Professor smiled. "Mitkey," he said, "my little star-mouse. I think you are more happier now."

He watched them a moment, fondly, then reached down and flipped the switch that broke the electrical barrier. Of course they didn't know they were free, but when the Professor picked them up and placed them carefully on the floor, one ran immediately for the hole in the wall. The other followed, but turned around and looked back—still a trace of puzzlement in the little black eyes, a puzzlement that faded.

"Gootbye, Mitkey. You vill be happier this vay. Und there vill always be cheese."

"Squeak," said the little gray mouse, and it popped into the hole.

"Gootbye—" it might, or might not, have meant,

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

Here he is, gentlemen! We knew you'd be anxious to know something about the astounding Mitkey's master, so we went straight to Fredric Brown with a request for some information about himself, and he came back royally with the following.

Incidentally, we wanted to give you some dope on Leydenfrost, our really super-swell new artist, but it hadn't come in as we went to press. We'll have him in the next issue, though. Those of you who read Life may already know him from his superb drawings of convoys and naval battles that he has done for that weekly.

Fredric Brown, author of *The Star-Mouse*, is thirty-five years old, married, has two sons, and lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

But it was in Richmond, Va., that he met Mitkey Mouse and the date of their meeting was last summer, while Mr. Brown was traveling in the East. He says, of their meeting:

"I won't mention the name of the hotel in Richmond, lest they might sue me for mentioning in print that they had mice, or anyway a mouse. But it was two o'clock in the morning during a July heat wave and, unable to make terms with Morpheus, I was staring out of the window at the sky and wondering why it didn't melt, when I saw the flash of the rocket. I couldn't tell where it landed. Later I heard a gnawing sound in one corner of my room and I turned away from the window and said 'Mitkey?' but there wasn't any answer, so I guess it wasn't him. It couldn't have been, of course, because Mitkey had landed—on his return trip—in Long Island Sound and was never in or near Richmond. So, come to think of it, it couldn't have been Mitkey's rocket I saw either. But it gave me an idea; I took out my slide-rule and worked out a formula. It came out MOUSE plus ROCKET equals STAR-MOUSE and that was so silly that I said, 'But Mitkey—' And there he was, complete with red pants and yellow gloves, and he said 'Vot iss?' and I told him. When I sobered up, I wrote the story."

That sounds a bit wild and woozy, but then again so is the story whose inception it describes, so we're inclined to take the author's word that it really happened that way. You'll see what we mean when you've read *The Star-Mouse*.

But back to Fredric Brown. He plays chess, poker, golf and the flute, each of them (except poker) abominably. Mostly he writes detective stories and stays sober, but accidents like Mitkey occasionally happen when he's off guard.

GODS OF SPACE

By RAY CUMMINGS

**Planetoid-150 was a world of horror.
A star of death, ruled by a weird and
beautiful Earthian goddess.**

THE weird purple glow of the planetoid was apparent now, even to the naked eye. The end of Roy Atwood's long, lonely journey was at hand. In the narrow control-turret of his small spaceship he sat gazing. Planetoid-150, in the belt out here, far beyond Mars, was a great leaden disc now occupying nearly a quarter of the firmament. And the purple glow of the *Xarite* was puzzling. On Earth, young Atwood's father had located the treasured substance with a giant electro-spectroscope; seen it after patient search as a tiny tracery, a faint band upon the prismatic 'graph of the light from this distant world.

And now Atwood was here, seeking it. Long since he had discarded his spectroscope, here in the spaceship turret. It had been his compass, the identification of Planetoid-150, enabling him to chart his course. It was unnecessary now. He stared, puzzled. Surely there must be an immense amount of the electroidally active *Xarite*—the name his father had given it—here on this little world. And all concentrated almost in one spot, apparently. The weird purple sheen was intense; a patch down there on the putty-colored surface of the five-hundred-mile-diameter asteroid. Occasionally he could see it clearly. Then at other times the leaden, sullen, low-hanging cloud masses of the unknown little world wholly obscured it.

WITH his journey's end so near, Atwood's heart was pounding. But a grimness was on him. He was a young fellow; just twenty-four this Earth-summer of 2050, a handsome young giant whose hundred and ninety pounds were stretched over a powerful, yet almost

lanky, frame. In the Government College of New York, he had been a champion athlete. What would he be here?

Actually, Atwood cared very little what strange form of life might exist here on Planetoid-150. His was not a trip of scientific exploration. Now that the beginning of Interplanetary travel was at hand, he was willing to leave all that sort of thing to the professional scientists. His was a secret adventure, and so he had of necessity come alone. His purpose was to land on this unknown little world, and get a small quantity of the treasured *Xarite*. With that safely stored in the foot-long, insulated cylinder which now was ready to strap on his back, he would leave and get back to Earth as speedily as possible.

It had been a long journey. Atwood contemplated it now as the round disc of the asteroid enlarged until it was beneath him, stretching all across the lower firmament; and he set his anti-gravity plates to resist his fall and verified that the repellent rocket-streams of electroidal gases were ready for the final atmospheric descent. By his calculation he would emerge from the clouds fairly close to the *Xarite* purple glow. It would be early evening here. He recalled the details of Planetoid-150 which had been in the letter to him from his dead father. Meager details indeed. Dr. Paul Atwood had calculated the asteroid at between five and six hundred miles in diameter.

Then the clouds broke away. Atwood's heart was pounding as he stared down for his first real sight of the unknown world. At first it was a blur of deep purple radiance. It seemed to blind him, this weird glow to which his eyes were unaccustomed. But presently he could see better.

Illustrated by Musacchia



Together they leaped. Behind them, pouring through the break in the forcescreen, poured the monstrous genes.

A HEAD, the purple glow suffused the night with its faint but lurid sheen. Then his eyes seemed to grow accustomed to the purple so that he had the illusion of it fading a little with the details of the scene taking form. A broken forest stretched here—a strange, spindly form of purple and red vegetation. In places it grew a hundred feet or more high in a tangled, lush, solid mass of interwoven vines. There seemed no trees. It was all slender-stalked, spindly.

Atwood stared, amazed, puzzled. The forest, if it could be called that, grew in dense patches, interspersed with open spaces where there was apparently a little soil. Others were naked, gleaming masses of metallic rock. The forest patches swayed in a gentle night-breeze like marine vegetation in water. The stalks of the vines were thick with giant pods; balloon-like things twenty feet or more in length. It was as though gases of decomposing vegetation within them were lifting them so that their upward pull held erect the swaying, hundred-foot stalks.

Off in the distance, from the height at which he stared down, Atwood could see a thread of river. It gleamed dull purple-green, from the *Xarite*-glow, and the reflection of the cloud-light. The same glow of cloud-light shone on the forest-top.

Landing demanded all of Atwood's attention, so that after his first quick scrutiny of what lay down there, he looked about for a place to land. He headed for a dim open space in the forest, an almost level hundred-foot area seemingly of rocky soil.

Then, at last, he had landed; brought the forty-foot, narrow little ship down flat upon its spreading base fins. With air helmet beside him in the event this atmosphere was not breathable, he cautiously opened a pressure-exit porte. The cylinder's air did not go out. On the contrary, the outer pressure was greater, so that the planetoid's air came hissing in—a rush at first, then a filtering drift, and then it stopped.

Atwood's head reeled. He gripped his air-mask; then his head steadied and he discarded the mask. Breathable air. It was heavy; moist, aromatic with strange

smells of the forest. But breathable. In a moment he hardly noticed its strangeness. In the silence, mingled with the thumping of his heart against his ribs, a low hum now was audible coming through the open porte. The voice of the forest. The blended hum of insect life. Was it that? He listened. It was a weird hum. So faint it seemed that he heard it within his head, rather than against his ear-drums. A tiny throbbing sound. But he seemed to know that it was vast. The blend of billions of still more tiny sounds. And queerly, it seemed hideous. A thing at which he should shudder. A thing of terror.

With a lugubrious grin he shoved away the thought. Certainly it was no more than a hunch, a premonition.

Atwood was clad in short, tight trousers, grey shirt open at his muscular throat, and heavy boots. His crisp curly blond hair was matted with sweat on his forehead. The descent through the atmosphere had made his little ship insufferably hot. This moist, heavy night air was a relief, but not much. At his wide leather belt, pulled tight around his waist, he carried a small electroidal flash-gun in a holster. The insulated cylinder into which he would put the *Xarite* was slung with a leather strap over one shoulder. In a hand-case he carried his portable mining equipment and a few explosive-capsules. But he did not expect to need any of it. Surely this *Xarite* was on the surface. And with a glow like this, it must exist in almost a pure state. Perhaps it was not more than a mile from here in a concentrated lode somewhere here in this weird forest. All he needed was a scant pound of it. He might have it and be back here in an hour or two.

Fully ready now for what he hoped was a simple quest, Atwood stepped through the exit porte. Within the ship his interior gravity was maintained at about that of Earth. But as he stepped over the threshold, the gravity of the planetoid gripped him. Amazing change. He clutched at the porte-casement to steady himself. His weight—certainly most of it—had gone. Swaying on his feet, the lightness made him reel. Then gingerly he took a step. Seemingly he

weighed now no more than ten or fifteen pounds. Carefully, with flexed knees, he impelled himself upward. It was the sort of leap which on Earth would have taken him a foot or so off the ground. He rose now to a height higher than his head, and came down, landing in a scrambling heap.

FOR a while, amused in spite of his grimness, Atwood experimented. By the feel of his cautious attempts, a good running leap would sail him a hundred feet or more, and probably smash him against a rock. Better be careful at first. It wouldn't be hard to kill himself, making errors with a power like this. His muscles were so powerful now in comparison with his weight.

Then he was ready to start. That faint weird humming still was audible. But there seemed nothing living here—no insect life underfoot, no birds in the trees. And, suddenly, he stood staring, stricken. Something was up on the top of the nearby patch of forest. The matted vegetation up there a hundred feet above him was so solid that he realized now he probably could manage to walk upon it. Something was moving up there. A swaying little blob, vaguely white.

Atwood stood silent, watchful with his gun in his hand. The blob seemed about five feet tall. White limbs; a flowing drape. Then, as it moved, a little more light came upon it—starlight filtering down now through a break in the overhead clouds.

Atwood sucked in his breath with his amazement. A girl! A human girl! Apparently she had not seen him; and, suddenly, she jumped from the top of the swaying mass of vines and came fluttering down. A girl, with pale drapes held like wings in her outstretched hands, so that like a bird she fluttered down and landed lightly on her feet. She was only a few paces from Atwood when she saw him. For an instant, amazed, she stood staring, like himself, stricken. An Earthgirl? Certainly she looked it. A slender little thing with dark flowing tresses; a draped robe to her knees—a robe with a flowing cape at her shoulders, the ends of which she had gripped

to spread it like wings as she jumped down. And now he saw that the robe wasn't fabric, but seemingly made of woven, dried vegetation.

"Well—" Atwood gasped. "What in the devil—"

With a cry like a frightened animal she stooped, seized a chunk of rock; flung it. The rock came, very much as a hurled rock would, on Earth. It struck Atwood's shoulder. The girl turned, and with a leap made off.

"I'll be damned," Atwood muttered. His caution, this time, was gone. He jumped, went thirty feet, landed on his side. Already the girl was gone. Then he saw her as like a monkey she went up a vine-rope. He tried it; hauled himself up with amazing speed. On the vine-top he tried running. But after a leap or two, with the girl far ahead of him, he found himself entangled, floundering in the matted mass of vines. His gun had been knocked from his hand, lost as it fell down into the leafy abyss.

The girl, apparently less afraid of him now, stood a hundred feet away, balanced on a swaying, rope-like vine as she peered at him.

"All right," Atwood muttered. "I guess I can't catch you."

Certainly he had no idea that she could understand him. But, suddenly, she laughed—a little rippling rill of human laughter, mingled with awe.

"You speak my language?" Her soft voice was amazed. English! It was quaintly, queerly intoned. But English nevertheless. And she added, in wonderment. "Who are you that you speak the language of the Gods?"

He could only stare, wordless. And abruptly she was coming forward; slowly at first, and then, overcoming her fear, she jumped and landed beside him.

He seized her. "Look here, who the devil are you?"

"Me? I am Ah-li, Goddess of the Marlangs."

"Well," he said. "Whatever that is. Anyway, be reasonable. I'm Roy Atwood. I've just come from Earth. You came from there, too, of course. When did you come? Your people, are they around here?"

She seemed only able to stare at him

as though numbed. Seemingly, she understood his words, but certainly not their meaning.

"The Earth?" she murmured at last. "What is that? My people? They are here, of course. The Marlans." Her slim white arm gestured out over the forest-top. "I am Goddess Ah-li." Wonderment was in her dark eyes and in her voice. "And now you come—a God, like me."

Her voice faltered. She was trying to smile. "I am afraid I do not understand," she murmured. "A Man-God coming here to rule with me. Never did I think that could happen."

FOR a moment, as he sat there clutching the girl in the tangled vines of the swaying forest-top, Atwood was at a loss for words. Beyond doubt, English was this girl's native language. Had some Earth-explorers landed here, bringing her when she was an infant? Earth-people who had died or been killed when the girl was too young to have learned anything? But her mature, fluent English belied that. In all those years, from infancy to maturity, alone here with what apparently were primitive natives of the planetoid, she would have forgotten her Earth-language.

She was staring at him blankly, her wonderment matching his own. "When did you come here?" he demanded. "Can't you remember?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I was born—I appeared here in the forest—it was, how you would say, about two thousand of our days ago."

With the day here about half that of Earth, she was naming something less than three Earth-years.

"You appeared here in the forest?" he prompted.

"Yes. From the sky I came. The Marlans saw me coming down. In my God-chariot." She gestured. "Like yours there, it must have been. Only mine, they tell me, burst into flame and destroyed itself when it touched the ground."

A miracle surely. But to Atwood, the miracle was that from a wrecked, flaming little spaceship, somehow she must have escaped alive. Had she come alone,

or with others who, doubtless, in the wreck of the ship, had been cremated so that remains of them had never been found?

"And you can't remember that coming?" Atwood demanded.

"Oh, yes. When human life came to me I was among the Marlans. I could not talk their language, then, but only the language of the Gods. This language of yours," she added. "God-language of you and of me."

Weird. She was so obviously sincerely truthful; she believed it. Naïve, child-like. Yet there was upon her, implanted by her belief, an aspect of power. A consciousness that she was a Goddess here. A radiance of her power, and a humility—a feeling of responsibility to One on High, who had sent her here as His servant.

And now she was staring at Atwood, another of God's servants, like herself. A Man-God. She stared with a little color coming into her cheeks and her breath quickened.

"I see," he murmured. Then abruptly on her forehead he noticed a scar—white scar-tissue over an area of an inch or so. He reached gently and shifted a lock of her hair. It was the scar of a ragged cut. Quite evidently a nasty wound. Three years ago?

"What is that?" he asked.

"Oh—that? There was my human blood running from it when they found me. My human birth—"

A crash when she landed. A brain concussion. And it had stricken her with amnesia—all her memory gone so that at that instant when she regained consciousness her life in effect was beginning again. Atwood understood it now.

"I see," he nodded. "Well, Ah-li, my name is Roy."

"Rohee," she repeated.

"I came, landed just now, from Earth."

"The Heaven of the Gods?" she murmured. "Oh, yes. Tell me. Surely I came from there, too. And you can remember it."

"I sure can. Ah-li, listen. What you've got to understand now—" Abruptly he checked himself. It wouldn't be easy to tell her. And then he had a queer thought. Was it right for him to destroy

her faith in her own power to do good among the people of this world? Certainly he'd better find out what was here, first. And she probably would not believe him anyway.

"Tell me," he amended. "The Marlans—your people here."

Under his questions she told him with simple directness. The planetoid here was known as Marla. The Marlans were its only race. Not many of them now of recent generations—a few thousands, he gathered, most of whom lived in a settlement here in the forest only a short distance away.

"There were many, once," she was saying. "But always the rising of the terrible *Genes* killed them off. We have learned now to subdue the *genes* with the glow of the *Drall-stone* light."

The radiance of the *Xarite*. Her gesture indicated it. From here, on the forest top, the patch of its light-radiance showed plainly an Earth-mile or so away. Weird thing. So far as he could understand now, these *genes* seemed to be microscopic things of horror. At intervals, caused by the weather, or in rhythmic cycles of some mysterious process of nature, the *genes* abruptly grew from microscopic spores into ghastly monsters. But the radiance of the *Xarite* held them in check. So that of recent years the human Marlans had learned to use the *Xarite* against these monsters of the half-world. A barrage of the *Xarite* radiance was set up here to protect the Marlan settlement.

"I think I understand," Atwood said at last. "Queerly enough, I came here to get some of that *Xarite*, as we call it on Earth. It is needed there."

"In the God-realm they need—"

"Yes," he hastily agreed. "Anyway—Oh, well, never mind that."

His thoughts went back to the letter he had received from his father who had died suddenly. Young Atwood had been taking a post-graduate science-medical course in the great Anglo-American University in London. His father's death had brought him hastily back. And the bank had given him the letter which his father had left for him.

"My dear Son:" the letter began. "I am preparing this data for you so that if

anything should happen to me before my work is done, you will be able to carry on for me. I haven't been able to tell you—it has had to remain a secret. I have been working with a Dr. Georg Johns, astronomer and physicist of Boston. As you know, all my life, Roy, has been devoted to the discovery of the cause of poliomyelitis—"

The dread infantile paralysis. Dr. Atwood, ten years ago, had propounded the theory that it was a sub-microscopic spore so small that even the giant electromicroscopes could not detect it. So small that it was non-filterable—no filter had ever been devised that could trap it, despite the claims of having done that which other medical men had made.

Surely that was a negative result indeed. But, then, Dr. Atwood had discovered, in the ore of Xarium, which existed in very small quantities on Earth, a product which he had named *Xarite*. He had spent a considerable fortune doing it—the resolution of many tons of Karium, refined down into an almost microscopic quantity of an electroidally active substance. And with it, for a year he worked miracles. As though by magic the emanations from his tiny *Xarite* tube, magnified and projected in the fashion of radiotherapy treatments, had cured victims of the dread disease.

But the triumph was short-lived. The *Xarite* tube exhausted itself. And on Earth, the scarcity of the ore of Xarium was such that to secure another grain of *Xarite* seemed practically an impossibility. And then the death of Dr. Atwood had come, and Roy had gotten the letter. His father had secretly been working with Dr. Johns. Together, with Dr. Johns' huge electrospectroscope, they had discovered the existence of *Xarite* on Planetoid 150. And had kept it secret. With the era of Interplanetary adventure now at hand, both the physicians feared that the *Xarite* treasure might fall into unscrupulous hands, be exploited for profit. They wanted to get it themselves and invent the radiotherapy projectors suitable for its use; and give it all to the suffering children of the world as their benefaction.

Dr. Atwood's letter to his son told how, finally, Dr. Johns had secured a

small spaceship and had gone, trying to get to Planetoid-150. Dr. Atwood, in delicate health, had not dared make the trip. He had been waiting; and had left this letter to Roy, with voluminous data, as a precaution. Roy had read the letter a hundred times. It was in the small spaceship which he had built with the money inherited from his father, and which had brought him here. He remembered its final, pleading words:

"You must carry on for me, Roy. Believe me, son, the lives of thousands of children will be in your hands. And the health of thousands upon thousands of others, who do not die, but live with twisted little bodies, tragic, pathetic, piteous monuments to the futility of man's medical skill. You have seen them. They will be counting upon you."

How could he fail them? And how could he fail his dead father? The thought of that was what had spurred him; what had brought him here with a grim determination to secure the *Xarite* and get back as soon as possible.

"You are very quiet," the girl said timidly out of the silence.

"I was thinking," he said. "Out there in our—our God-Heaven if that's what you want to call it—well, it's certainly very queer—"

QUEER indeed. How could he even attempt to explain it to her! These *genes*—hideous monsters here on this little world, held in check, destroyed by the *Xarite* radiance. And on Earth, the dread sub-microscopic spores of poliomyelitis—his father had killed them with *Xarite*-radiance. As though here might be not only the original source of the terrible spores, but the cure for them as well. Nature striking a balance here; and failing to do it on Earth. Did the spores, the *genes* drift through the immensity of space? Young Atwood well remembered that even a hundred years ago, physicians had advanced some such theory. Spores, landing on Earth, where conditions would not allow them to grow in size, but where they could only multiply themselves in the bodies of human victims.

"I was thinking," Atwood began again. And then he shrugged hopelessly and

gave it up. "Ah-li, listen. Take me to your people now. They will know I'm friendly?"

"Friendly? Why, of course. A god—to help them—"

And he would get his cylinder full of *Xarite* in its pure state, and then go back to Earth. And take the girl with him? The thought occurred to him suddenly and sent a queer vague thrill through him. . . .

She was helping him to his feet. "We will go," she said. "The God—Roh-ee—Oh, they will welcome you!"

"We're supposed to go up here over the tree-tops?"

With a faint smile she regarded him. "Well, it is not very far. But you are clumsy."

"I think I'd feel better on the ground," he agreed.

A leap down, for him from this hundred-foot height, could have been dangerous. It was different with the girl. On Earth she might have weighed not much over a hundred pounds; and with her slight weight here, the pressure of her spread grass-cloak against this heavy air was sufficient. She fluttered down; and like a clumsy monkey he half dropped, half fell, clinging to the vine-ropes.

They started over the rocks. "We'll take it slow," he said. "Until I get used to it."

They followed the open spaces between the patches of forest. The weird scene was dim in the night-glow. Occasionally now, through breaks in the patches of lush vegetation, Atwood could see that the radiance of the *Xarite*-glow ahead of them was growing. . . . Strange progress, this half walking, half leaping advance. It was hard for Atwood to keep his feet; almost impossible to gauge the distance a leap would carry him. Many times he fell. Muscles that he had seldom used before were beginning to ache.

"Let's rest a minute," he protested presently.

They were in a rocky defile, like a little gully descending. Atwood dropped to the ground and drew up the girl beside him. More than ever now, the idea of taking her to Earth was in his mind. How could he ever have imagined

leaving her here, an Earthgirl, suffering from amnesia. And he was thinking. Dr. Georg Johns, his father's friend, had left the Earth, presumably to come here.

"Listen, Ah-li," he said. "I don't want to confuse you too much. Don't think I'm crazy or anything. In this place where I just came from there used to be someone called Dr. Georg Johns. Doesn't that mean something to you? Think back."

He stared at her; and on her face, at mention of the name, there came a queer, startled puzzlement.

"Why—why—" she could only stammer. Puzzled, with some vague consciousness of memory stirring within her. And then it was gone. "Why—what is that?" she murmured. "You speak so strangely. The words I understand, but the things you say—"

"Forget it, Ah-li. I don't want to worry you. There are things you used to know, and that you'll remember sometime. They'll come back to you."

"My life in the God-Heaven?"

"Yes, sure. Call it that."

During all this time with the girl, Atwood had been conscious of that weird, gruesome undercurrent of humming which seemed a sinister background to this little world. And now, as momentarily they were silent here in the small rocky recess, abruptly he was aware that the humming had greatly intensified. Ah-li at the same instant noticed it. Terror leaped to her face as her hand gripped his arm.

"That humming—" he murmured.

"Yes. Oh, evidently this is the time for the *genes* to come out! I thought so; that is why I was out in the tree-tops tonight—to see if any were around."

The *genes*. On Earth they might remain always as sub-microscopic spores, multiplying in human nerve and brain tissue to cause the ghastly poliomyelitis. But here they were merely lurking monsters, seasonally growing into visible things of horror. Things with a voice. Countless billions of them, with their blended tiny voices faintly audible.

The rock recess here was dark. It was like a little cave, with an open, narrow front. Atwood and the girl were seated several feet back from the en-

trance. And now, as the tiny humming suddenly was increasing, in the grotto entrance close before them, a little spot was visible on the rocks. A spot, like a dot of saffron glow. For that stricken second numbly Atwood stared at it; an inch-long blob of glow, with a tiny solid nucleus.

Only a second or two Atwood and Ah-li sat transfixed with horror. The glow was expanding. A swift expansion—so swift that it was like a saffron balloon being blown up into size tremendous. As though hideous forces of nature, held in check, now abruptly were released. A tentacled thing, big as a football. But before Atwood and the girl could more than struggle to their feet, it was a monstrous saffron thing of horror—a round, glowing, luminous pulpy mass, big as Atwood now. Its bulk blocked the cave-entrance.

"Good God—" Atwood muttered. "We're penned in here!"

There was no chance for them to leap away. In terror Ah-li was clinging to him. The dark narrow confines of the recess were lurid now with the monster's ghastly yellow light. Its hideous voice was a humming throb. For another second it stood blocking the opening, apparently its full size now, with long tentacles weaving like tongues of yellow fire; and a ring of clustered eyes in its center, balefully glowing.

And then, with a rolling lunge, it hurled itself forward!

IT was a blur, a chaos of utter horror to Atwood. He had no time to do more than thrust Ah-li behind him when the monster was upon him. Weird and ghastly combat. He was conscious of being engulfed by the horrible glutinous mass as the noisome saffron pulp wrapped itself around him. Wildly he fought, staggering, with kicking legs and flailing arms. The intense yellow glow, so close to his eyes now, was dazzling, blinding. Its voice was chattering, like a dynamo gone awry; a throbbing voice that mingled with the girl's cry of terror.

"Oh, do not fall. Keep standing!"

"You run—" he gasped. "Get past it and run."

He mustn't fall. That would be the

end. The sticky weight of the thing pressed him. Sucking tentacles were wrapped around him. In the saffron glare he could not see if the monster still blocked the cave-opening. If only he could get it further inside, so Ah-li could slip past. Then he realized that as he fought to get loose, his flailing hands were pulling the oozy tissue apart. He ripped one of the tentacles loose. It fell like a segment of yellow flame, writhing on the ground. But there was no wound where it had been, for it seemed that the oozy flesh flowed around the break.

Then he felt Ah-li tugging at him as again he staggered, almost went down. She was tugging, trying to pull him loose. And the monster now, with chattering, enraged voice rising in pitch, was trying to draw him inward. A slap of the horrible stuff struck his face; choking him. He wiped it off; tore loose a great segment of the body and cast it away.

"Now—you—get free—we can run—" The girl's panting voice came to him out of the chaos. Behind him she was pulling at his shoulders, adding her slight strength and weight to his.

And suddenly he found himself loose, staggering backward. The monster, gathered itself, with its glowing fragments on the rocks around it, rolled itself a few feet away. Atwood found that he was in the mouth of the cave. Ah-li shoved him, and he was outside.

"You jump—now!"

The huge, screaming, saffron ball lunged for them. With his hand gripping hers, they jumped, sailed together in a flat arc over the monster and landed fifty feet behind it. Atwood, who had fallen, picked himself up. At the mouth of the cave the huge round ball, with new tentacles growing upon it, stood seemingly confused by the escape of its prey. Then, growling with a low sullen murmur, suddenly it rolled itself back into the darkness of the recess. Lurking, with only the reflected light of it at the opening to show that it was there.

Panting, still with horror making him shudder, Atwood followed the girl. They skirted an edge of waving forest growth, descending a rocky declivity. Open rocky space was to the left of them now, with

a little line of hillocks. Ahead, at a lower level, the glow of the purple *Xarite*-radiance was a big patch in the darkness. And now in the patch, Atwood could see what seemed a weird little human settlement. Clusters of low, mound-shaped dwellings of rocks and mud and grass. The semblance of crooked little streets. The purple glow bathed it—a half mile, irregular patch. And beyond it and to the sides, there was only blank darkness.

"That is Marla," Ah-li was saying. "We shall have to put the light-force up now for the season of the growing of *genes*. The time has come."

With his questions, she tried to make it clear. The radiance off there which enveloped the little settlement was inherent to the ground itself. Most of the Marlans of this little world lived here. And those others who were nearby, now at the season of the growing of the *genes*, would come flocking into the glow. A few days, a week or two; and then the *genes* would die away until the next cycle of their growth. But even this natural glow was not sufficient to hold them off, so that the Marlans set up around their settlement what Ah-li called a light-fence. A sort of barrage; a few hundred little braziers of *Xarite*, set at intervals on the ground, their spreading glow mingling one with the other, encircling the village. A barrage which no *gene* would dare pass.

"I see," Atwood murmured. "But Ah-li, where do you get that *Xarite*? Near here?"

"Oh, yes." She gestured toward the dark little line of hills off to the left. "It is there. Most of it, in grottos underground. You see, it is not far."

"And what's it like? Loose in the caves?"

He held his breath for her answer. "Yes," she said. "The *Drall-stone*. It lies loose in the caves."

Triumph swept him. He could get his insulated cylinder packed with *Xarite*, and then get back to his Spaceship and away. And take Ah-li with him.

"Listen," he began, "show me the way to one of those caves. I want to see—"

"Here is water, for us to swim," she interrupted. "The flesh of the *gene* is still on us."

Heaven knew he had been conscious of it. A little stream of purplish phosphorescent water, impregnated no doubt with the *Xarite*, came babbling down the slope here from the distant hills. He and Ah-li plunged in; came out, with the purple phosphorescence of the water dripping from them.

Atwood breathed with relief. "That's certainly better." Now, if he could get her to lead him to the *Xarite* caves.

"Ah-lee. Ah-lee." It was the sound of a guttural voice calling from the dimness of the rocks near at hand. The startled Atwood turned to see a group of small stocky figures approaching.

THE Marlans. With Ah-li gripping him he stood as the figures came forward and ranged themselves in a jabbering group around him and the girl. They were about five feet tall. Cast somewhat in Earth-human mould, with crooked heavy legs, and swart, putty-colored skin. The body was wide-shouldered, thick-chested. The round, hairless head was set low in a depression of the shoulders. The face was rough-hewn of feature, with up-turned snout-like nose, and small, watery reddish eyes.

They walked with a sluggishness of heavy, solid tread. Quite evidently their bodies were a wholly different density from that of Earthmen. Atwood guessed that here they weighed what might be called three hundred pounds; compared to which his own weight was ten or fifteen, and that of Ah-li not more than five or eight. Beside them, with their swinging, ponderous movements, Atwood suddenly felt spindly and birdlike. How obvious now, that these primitive people would have accepted the beautiful little Earth-girl as a Goddess! Her coming from the sky in a thing which struck the ground and burst into flame. Her seeming miraculous ability to leap into the air. Her size, and yet her lightness. Her ability to swim; to leap into the vine-tops and run upon their frail sway-ing surface.

Certainly these Marlans would sink like stones in this light water; they could

leap no more than a heavy man could leap on Earth. Their weight chained them to the ground.

"Ah-lee. . . ." One of them, slightly taller, less ponderous than the others, came forward, with a flood of words to the girl.

She answered him in weird, guttural, unintelligible words, with gestures toward Atwood at whom now they were all staring in awe. And then abruptly she added, in English:

"A Man-God has come to us, Bohr."

"That fellow understands English?" Atwood put in.

"Yes. A little. I have taught him, since this time when I was born from the sky."

"The language of the Gods," Bohr said heavily. "It, I understand. I am like a God too—"

Whatever plans Atwood vaguely had made, were swept away now. There seemed not so much awe of him upon these jabbering, crowding Marlans as curiosity. They were plucking at him now, with heavy, taloned hands feeling his arms, prodding at his ribs. And abruptly he realized the tremendous strength of these creatures. A ponderous power of muscles; a different quality of strength from that of any Earthman.

The realization sent a thrill of fear through Atwood; mentally he cursed himself that he had not seized Ah-li, rushed her to one of those caves for the *Xarite*, and gotten away from this accursed place. But there was nothing he could do about it now. Bohr and one of the others gripped him, leading him along, with Ah-li excitedly beside them, and the crowd of jabbering Marlans engulfing them.

The crowd augmented as they progressed down the slope. It was fifty, then a hundred. And now he saw women. They were garbed much the same as the men—shorter, more flabby-looking bodies with wispy hair on their heads. Their shrill voices mingled with the deeper tones of the men, as they pressed forward, some of them carrying children, all of them trying to get a glimpse of Atwood.

"You are to see our Ruler, the great Selah," Ah-li said, as she walked beside him, clinging to him. "Tonight, I am sure, you will be proclaimed a God." Her

young voice quivered. "Our Man-God." "All right, but look here—" Atwood muttered. "You better get us out of this now. This crowd is getting pretty heavy."

They were among the little mound-shaped houses. The narrow crooked streets were jammed with pressing people.

"Yes," Ah-li agreed. "To my home first. And then the Selah will send for you."

In the Marlan language she gave her commands to Bohr. He seemed to assent. But in the light-radiance here which suffused the turmoil of the weird little village, Atwood had a better look at the leader of these Marlans. Bohr was close beside him; and on the Marlan's grotesque, ugly face, Atwood saw an expression very strange. A sort of sidelong leer at Atwood; and a look at Ah-li that made Atwood's heart pound. It was as though this Bohr were suddenly resentful. As though something which he might have been planning was going wrong. And abruptly, as though with a premonition of menace, Atwood recalled the only words of English which Bohr had spoken: The language of the Gods," he had said. "It, I understand. I am like a God too."

Ahead of them a larger dwelling loomed in the radiant glow. "My home," Ah-li said. "We will go there, and wait."

AH-LI'S dwelling was a house seemingly of three mounds interlocked. A glow of dim purple radiance showed through its small window-openings. And there were upright ovals for doors. The milling crowd stood watching as they entered. There seemed three small rooms inside.

Amazement swept Atwood. There was crude furniture here, woven of plaited vines—a table; chairs. A low little couch with dried leaves upon it. Furniture almost in Earth-style.

"Where did you get that?" Atwood murmured as he surveyed it.

"That? Why, I made it. I do not know why, but that seemed the right thing to do."

Memories of her Earth-life which were stirring in her, so vague that she did not recognize them.

"You go now, Bohr," Ah-li added.

Atwood swung to find the Marlan be-

hind him. "Yes," Bohr said, "I will tell to the Great-Selah that the Man-God has come." Bohr's wide heavy jaws were chewing; and as he stood eyeing Atwood, he swayed on his feet.

"You chew the intoxicating weed?" Ah-li said reproachfully. "That is not good, Bohr. You want to be God-like—you should not do that."

"I know it," he said. His gaze fell before hers. And then as he turned to leave the room, again his strange flashing look swept Atwood, and there was hatred and menace in it.

"We will eat now," Ah-li said. "I have food here."

It was a strange meal. The food was peculiar though palatable. But Atwood hardly was aware of the food as he ate it. At the windows here he could see that Marlans were watching them. Others undoubtedly were watching the doors. There would be no chance, certainly not now, for him to get out, even though, once outside and free, he knew that no Marlan possibly could catch him. Nor had he the least chance of getting Ah-li out. Especially since she would probably be unwilling.

"You have told them of the *genes*?" he heard himself say.

Her voice sounded worried.

"Yes. They are putting the barrage up now."

On impulse Atwood went to one of the windows. The Marlans there drew back, but stood at a little distance, staring at him. Behind them, the weird, glowing little village was in a turmoil with the excitement of the coming of a Man-God, and the news of the *genes*, the dread season of monsters again at hand. Doubtless the word had spread. From the nearby smaller settlements, the people were hurrying here. The streets seemed more jammed than ever now; and out beyond the edge of the village, radiant beams of the purple light were standing up at intervals into the sky; spreading beams, intermingling to form the barrage curtain.

Atwood came back from the window. It faced the main village street. Atwood was wondering if the other side might not face some space darker, more empty. That would be this adjoining room.

"When do you think Selah will send for us?" he demanded.

"Perhaps soon. Perhaps later tonight."

He gestured toward the room's inner doorway. "And that room there, that is for me, the Man-God?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Then I shall go there now. You call me if the Selah wants us."

Triumph swept him as he reached the dim other room. He had lost his flashgun in the tree-tops when he was chasing the girl. But he still had his other equipment. He discarded it all now save the little insulated cylinder slung over his shoulder, the cylinder in which he would store the precious *Xarite*. The window-ovals here were dark. Cautiously he went to one of them. There was a sort of garden outside, with beds great blossoms topping spindly stalks. A little forest of them, high as a man's head. To the left, a section of the village was visible; crowded with milling excited Marlans. But to the right, beyond the garden there was dimness. The barrage at the outskirts of the village there, had not yet gone up. It should be possible to get out through this window; make a run through the shrouding flowers of the garden.

Atwood watched his chance. Then, like a shadow, he was out of the window, sliding into the tall flower-clusters. Every instant he feared that there would be an alarm; but there was not. Then he was through the garden, skirting a dark edge of the town. The barrage was going up to the left of him, but its light did not reach him, and in a moment he was in the open country, with great sailing leaps bounding toward the hills and the caves of the *Xarite*.

THE little cave was a weird, intense glare of violet light. Atwood had had no difficulty finding it; the glare streamed like an aura from its entrance, out into the night. The *Xarite*, almost in a pure state, lay in great powdery heaps. Atwood's hands were trembling as he scooped it up, filling his insulated cylinder, clamping down its lid. More than ever, a desperate haste was upon him now. So many things might be transpiring back in the village. And he realized too that his spaceship might be discovered.

Within a minute or two he was into the cave and out again, with his precious little cylinder slung on his back. He was more skillful at leaping now. Ahead the circular barrage was complete now, a vertical violet curtain of light enclosing the village. It made the darkness out here on the rocks seem more intense by contrast.

The dim landscape swayed weirdly with his flat sailing leaps. And suddenly, off to one side, he was aware that round blobs of yellow glow were appearing. The monster *genes*. With the season of their growth upon them, they were struggling up out of their microscopic invisible world.

The night out here now was hideous with the throbbing, humming voices of the monsters. Atwood's heart went cold. How would he get the girl out of this damnable place? He could think only that in some way he must quickly persuade her. Together, running, leaping like this—or like birds following the flimsy forest-top which the *genes* could not reach—he would be able to get her to the spaceship.

With the purple barrage curtain close before him, Atwood slowed up. Then he came within the direct light-radiance; crawling almost flat to pass between two of the braziers. The glare blinded him. Then he was through, rising to his feet.

"So? Here is the God—our Man-God who was gone?" It was Bohr's ironic, guttural voice. Atwood had no chance to jump away. Bohr, with a ponderous pounce, gripped him with the power of a machine. Bohr and a dozen of his roistering men were here.

"Our Man-God is late for the ceremony," Bohr was leering. They were shoving Atwood forward, along a village street crowded with jabbering Marlans, across an edge of the village toward an open space, like a public square. The mound-dwellings bounded it on one side, and the barrage was on the other. The square was thronged with Marlans, standing in jabbering groups, gazing toward the center where three platforms were erected. Two were side by side, and one faced them. The two were empty. On the other a single Marlan sat in a great cradle. The Ruler—Selah. His ponderous fat body was round with flesh. In the cradle he squatted like a huge toad.

Bohr's grip never for an instant had

relaxed on Atwood. "I am to be made a God now?" Atwood murmured.

"Yes. The Selah has decided." Surely that was leering irony in Bohr's heavy voice. Where was Ah-li? Then, as Atwood's captors shoved him toward the larger and higher of the two empty platforms, Atwood saw the girl. Slowly she was crossing the square. Ah-li, robed now in a long flowing, bluish grass garment with a garland of flowers around her head. The Goddess Ah-li. The Marlans, awed, bowed before her as she advanced, mounted the smaller platform and stood with her arms outstretched. The reflected glow of the barrage painted her face. Apprehension was there. And then she saw Atwood. Relief swept her; and then an exaltation. The recognition of a Man-God, with her to guide these people.

Then Atwood, tense and alert, stood on the other platform, facing the ruler. He was some twenty feet from the girl, and five feet or so above her.

"The Man-God is here," Bohr proclaimed in English. And then he seemed to be repeating it in the Marlan language.

The crowd was bowing now with foreheads to the ground. The Selah spoke in a piping, cracked voice; and with a gesture ordered Bohr from the platform.

ALONE, Atwood faced the Ruler and the prostrate throng. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Ah-li standing stiffly erect, with arms outstretched as though in benediction. And as the Selah now was intoning some ritual, Atwood drew himself up and lifted his arms.

But tensely, alertly he was watching. Where was Bohr? The big Marlin seemed to have vanished. A dozen of Bohr's men were in a little drunken group, their boisterous voices suppressed now as they stood at the edge of the platform behind the Selah's cradle. The barrage was close behind them. And as Atwood's apprehensive gaze stared at the purple radiance, dimly behind it he could see that the *genes* were crowding. Attracted by the scent of the human crowd here, they had gathered outside the barrage. Thousands of them—ghastly, tumbling, tentacled balls

of saffron, milling one upon the other as they pressed forward. Thousands? There could have been millions; a saffron sea of them out there.

"The Man-God will speak to us now." It was Ah-li's voice, prompting him.

Atwood gathered his wits. He began to talk. What matter the words. He hardly knew what he was saying, for abruptly behind the Ruler-Selah, Bohr had appeared. Bohr with a knife in his hand. And in that same instant, with a ponderous leap he plunged the knife into the Selah's bloated back!

There was a second of ghastly startled silence. Then chaos. The prostrate Marlans gasped; then leaped to their feet, shouting, milling with terror and confusion. Bohr's men from behind the platform leaped upon it. All of them with knives, plunging the blades into the Ruler's puffed, toadlike body; and then standing, shouting at the crowd.

It was a startled instant while Atwood stood numbed. Bohr again had vanished; and then suddenly he appeared on the platform with Ah-li and was standing beside her, with his heavy arm around her as she sagged against him in terror. He, too, was shouting at the crowd now; and then he shouted in English:

"I am the Man-God! Your Man-God and the new Ruler."

All in a few seconds, and then Atwood recovered his wits. Like an awkward plunging bird he leaped from one platform to the other, landing full upon Ah-li and the shouting Bohr. It took Bohr by surprise. Atwood's body struck him full so that he rocked, staggered a little, his grip releasing the girl as wildly he flailed his arms to ward off this huge attacking thing clinging to him. The impact against Bohr's solidity all but knocked the breath from Atwood. He found himself hanging with feet off the ground as he clung. And desperately he fought for the knife. Bohr's fingers in his confusion must have gripped it loosely; and abruptly Atwood had it, stabbed it into Bohr's face.

Gruesome thrust. It went slowly into the tough, heavy flesh as with all his strength Atwood shoved it to the hilt. Bohr screamed. His twitching arms

pushed Atwood a dozen feet away. With the knife still in his face and horrible ooze bubbling around it, he staggered and fell heavily from the platform. Then he was up on his feet, staggering, half blinded doubtless—staggering toward the barrage. And his scream rang out, first in the Marlan language and then in English:

"Not to be the Man-God—"

On the platform Atwood gripped the shaking, terrified girl. "We've got to get away from here."

"Why—why this is terrible."

"You listen to me! Don't talk! If you don't run with me, then I'm going to carry you." He shook her. "We're going, you understand?"

"Not to be the Man-God—" Bohr's scream still rang over the turmoil. He had staggered, found himself at one of the barrage-braziers. And suddenly in a frenzy he overturned the brazier. Its light went out. A slit of darkness leaped into the barrage.

"Not to be the Man-God—" A frenzy of disappointment, disillusionment was in Bohr's wild voice. All his plans now gone awry as he felt himself dying from the knifeblade in his head.

A slit of darkness in the barrage. . . . And now Bohr had staggered and overturned another brazier. It was his last act. He staggered and fell as through the widened dark slit, the hideous torrent of screaming, chattering saffron monsters rolled through. In a second Bohr was engulfed. The milling Marlans, shouting in wild terror now, were trying to run. Ponderous, sluggish steps. . . . The horrible yellow torrent engulfed them.

"Ah-li! Ah-li dear—" Atwood gasped. The girl, fascinated with horror had been resisting him. "We've got to try to get away."

"Yes. Oh, yes—I see it."

She guided him. Hand in hand they leaped—a great sailing leap that carried them across the square into a now almost deserted section of the village. And then another—over two or three of the mound-dwellings. Another, and they went through the opposite side of the barrage.

Open country. The monsters were all

rushing toward the barrage-break. With a leap Atwood and Ah-li went over a milling, tumbling group of a hundred of them. It was a wild, scrambling, leaping run. . . . The dark little spaceship lying flat on its hull-fins at the edge of the forest was a blessed haven to the panting, bruised Atwood.

"Inside! Quick now—" he gasped.

Genes were here, rolling forward; monstrous bobs of saffron as Atwood shoved the girl into the porte and slid its door. Through the heavy bulls-eye pane the gathering monsters were a turgid yellow blur. . . . Then the little ship was rising, with its rocket streams flaring out like a comet tail behind it. Atwood and the girl—escaping Gods, from a world which had become a purgatory.

IN the control turret they sat, staring ahead at the great stars that glittered in the black firmament. The Earth was a tiny glowing dot.

"There it is," Atwood said. "Your world, and mine. We've got the *Xarite*, Ah-li. You wanted to do good on that little planetoid. There'll be plenty of chance, on Earth."

"And that is Earth?" she murmured. "So small."

"It's very big," he said smilingly. "You'll see. If only my father and Dr. Johns were alive now, to greet us as we come with the *Xarite*. They worked so hard for this."

"Dr. Johns?" She was staring at him, startled. And then suddenly on her face and in her eyes there was the light of memory. "Dr. Johns? Why—why—"

"Yes?" he prompted. "Try and think!"

"Dr. Johns? Why—*Gloria*—yes, yes there was a Gloria! Why—that is my other name! His daughter—Gloria Johns—why, of course!"

Gloria Johns. . . . "Then your father and mine—they were friends," Atwood murmured.

The familiar scenes of Earth would bring everything back to her. And Ah-li, Goddess of the planet, would be gone. There would just be Gloria Johns.

They sat gazing at the immensity of Space—at the tiny dot of light which was their great world waiting for them.



The Ballad of Venus Nell

By Nelson S. Bond

Oh, the science of Man has narrowed the span
Between the near and the far,
With thunderous roar the great ships soar
From Earth to the dimmest star;
But though in their lust for gold they thrust
From planet to asteroid
The Will of the Great Astromer still
Is the Will of the cosmic void.

And from Earth's own Sol to the ebon hole
 Of the Coalsack's gaping maw
 Though Man may jet, he is subject yet
 To the Universal Law.
*For whoever shall plot for another's lot,
 Be he brother or foe or friend
 Who seeks his gain of a fellowman's pain
 Has a price to pay in the end.*

I

Now, Dougal MacNeer was a pioneer,
 Just one of a million such
 Who labor and toil in unmapped soil
 With shovel and pick and hutch.
 He was six-foot-two, and a man whom few
 Would care to engage in a fight,
 With shoulders as firm as a pachyderm:
 A tower of granite might.

He had eyes of gray, and a quiet way
 Of minding his own affairs;
 He never came down to a commerce town
 Save for fueling or ship repairs.
 Thus it was that he roused the *whys?* and *hows?*
 In the minds of the spaceport clique
 When he landed at Krull* with his tanks half full
 And rented a berth for a week.

The cradle-monk* stared, then boldly dared,
 "By golly, you've struck it rich!
 I always knew some day you'd come through,
 You lucky son-of-a—"

"Which,"

Asked Doug MacNeer with a smile sincere,
 "Is the best joy-joint in Krull?
 I've lived alone till my mind's ingrown;
 This prospecting life is dull.

"I want to go play from the dusk of day
 Till I waken to morning bells."
 The attendant said, with a nod of the head,
 "You amble to Venus Nell's.
 It's the hottest place in this end of space,
 Just a couple of minutes' jaunt;
 Nell's got music and games, and likker and dames
 —And anything else you want!"

* Krull, a mining town in N. Campbell Terr., Mars, 84 m. SW of Sand City; pop. 3,587.

* Cradle-monkey; spaceport attendant.

"Thanks, that sounds great!" said Mac. But, "Wait!"
 Begged the other, "Gimme a break!
 Help me out of this rut, MacNeer, and cut
 Me in on a share of the take?"
 "The take?" asked Doug with a little shrug,
 "But I haven't made any find!"
 And he strolled away with a whistle gay
 While the monkey glowered behind.

In a moment or two, Doug wandered through
 The gaudily-neoned door
 Of a feverish-gay, bright cabaret;
 Below, on the mirrored floor
 Of the dancehall swayed a cavalcade
 Of every breed and race
 Whose daughters and sons defy the suns
 To journey the ways of space.

A miner from Mars, pockmarked with scars
 Pressed close to a woman from Io,
 A Jovian baby drawled lazily, "Maybe—"
 To pleas of a tar from Ohio;
 A vicious-mouthed slattern from faraway Saturn
 Sang ditties to make the hair curl,
 And then—curtains parted, and Doug MacNeer started
 To see such a beautiful girl!

II

Venus Nell was no saint, any preacher would paint
 A bad ending for her at a peek,
 But her worst enemy would be forced to agree
 There was nothing wrong with her physique.
 She was flat where it flattered, and curved where it mattered,
 A creature of streamline and bubbles;
 She had bright yaller hair, and a definite flair
 For taking men's minds off their troubles.

She never had known the cap or the gown
 Of grammar- or high-school or college,
 Which didn't mean she couldn't win her A.B.
 In a certain and specialized knowledge.
 She had lure and illusion; creating confusion
 'Mongst men was but one of her tricks.
 Doug's eyes opened wide when she strolled to his side
 —And he fell like a cargo of bricks!

She drawled, "Howdy, sailor!" and Dougal turned paler,
 "H-howdy!" he managed to answer.
 Then, in sudden alarm, "Are you one of the charm-
 Gals?" he questioned, "Or only a dancer?"

Now, why an admission of her true position
Nell should at that moment decide
To conceal is a mystery buried in history;
Whatever the reason, she lied.

In fashion designed to make any man blind
She lowered her lashes and blushed.
(Which was no mean achievement itself.) "Oh, believe
Me! I'm no—entertainer," she gushed.
"I sell cigarettes, and I sometimes take bets
On the rocketship races—" MacNeer
Slowly nodded his head as he quietly said
"A girl like you shouldn't be here!

"I think we'd do well to get out of this hell
Of evil and vice," he decided.
Nell had to sit still and bite her lips till
Her inner amusement subsided.
This curious sucker, it suddenly struck her,
Meant business! His motives were pure.
To lead on the calf should be good for a laugh . . .
She smiled at him, shy and demure.

"Oh, I cannot do that," she replied, "but a chat
In a quieter spot—?" And she led
Dougall out of the glare to a cool garden square
With the stars burning high overhead.
She gave orders by sign that a beaker of wine
Be served in their shady retreat,
And wondered how long it would be ere this strong,
Handsome stranger acknowledged defeat.

But strangest to tell, it was Doug and not Nell
Who emerged from that contest the victor.
It was nothing he did, but a loneliness hid
In her bosom that finally tricked her.
For Doug spoke of the night, and the glorious flight
Of ships through the reaches of Space;
Of his hopes and his schemes—and his words wakened dreams
That softened the lines of Nell's face.

III

He was just on the verge of confessing the urge
That brought him back out of the void
When a servant discreet appeared in their retreat
And Nell faced the fellow, annoyed.
"Well?" she icily said. The man bobbed his head.
"A visiphone call on the rack."
Nell sighed as she rose. "Some friend, I suppose.
Wait, Dougall; I'll hurry right back."

An expression surprisingly soft in her eyes,
 She answered the visiphone.
 Her caller, however (the cradle-monk), never
 Detected her altered tone.
 "Hey, Nell, there's a chump on his way to your dump,
 A big, quiet sort of a lout
 By name of MacNeer—" Nell told him, "He's here;
 What's all the commotion about?"
 A hungry grimace of greed mottled the face of
 The vengeful space-harbor assistant.
 "Do I get my percent for a tip on the gent?"
 He parried in accents insistent.
 "You mean—?" whispered Nell. And, "Surer than hell!"
 The answer came back, swift and eager,
 "I've just seen his log, and he's in from the Bog
 With a claim-stake the size of Omega!"

Now, for those who don't know their A. L. & O.*
 The "Bog" is a treacherous sector
 Of planetoids legion, a tightly-packed region
 Avoided by every prospector.
 None but the most daring do any space-faring
 In those lethal, whirlgig niches,
 But spacemen all claim that the Bog is aflame
 With infinite, fabulous riches.

'Twas thence that the crew of the L-32
 Returned with a cargo of ore
 That assayed ninety-one and a half to the ton
 —Or maybe a little bit more.
 It was out of the Bog that old space-weasel Scrogg
 Withdrew on his gravity-tractor
 The rock 4-Omega, which brought such a figure
 Scrogg set himself up as a Factor.

So it's easily seen why Nell's new, serene
 Complaisance should disappear rudely.
 She gasped and she started; her crimson lips parted;
 Her eyes narrowed sharply and shrewdly.
 "You're positive?" Slyly responded the spy,
 "Why else would he put into Krull
 With motors O.Q., and flame-jets brand-new,
 And fuel-chambers more than half-full?"

IV

Now, though Nelly was young, as has often been sung,
 Her chosen profession was old.
 Both instinct and habit advised her to "*Grab it!*"
 Whenever she heard the word "gold."

*A. L. & O.—Astrogational Locs and Orbits, the space mariner's handbook.

She broke the connection, her vivid complexion
 More flushed, and with movements exotic
 Returned to the glade in which Dougal had stayed,
 Her inner emotions chaotic.

She studied MacNeer as she slowly drew near,
 Appraising him in a new light.
 Nell trusted her spy; he would not tell a lie—
 But somehow it didn't seem right!
 MacNeer didn't act like a man who had cracked
 A cache of asteroid dough,
 And yet—Venus Nell smiled tightly—Ah, well,
 She'd know in a minute or so.

With a cute little shrug she curled on the rug
 And smiled into Doug's sober face.
 "Go on!" she implored, "and tell me some more
 About your adventures in Space.
 Have you ever struck gold in the terrible cold?"
 Her voice was a query and taunt.
 Doug grinned at her there as he fondled her hair.
 "I've found all the gold that I want!"

Nell's eyes opened wide. "You have?" she replied,
 And suddenly somewhere within her
 A duel transpired 'tween the Nell who admired
 This miner and Nelly the sinner.
 Which would have won out is a matter of doubt
 But Dougal MacNeer, growing bolder,
 At that moment tossed dice with Fate—and he lost!
 —By placing a hand on her shoulder.

He bent to her ear, and, "Nelly, my dear,"
 He whispered, "Come lift graves with me
 To the skyways above . . . I'll teach you to love . . ."
 How wonderfully happy we'll be . . .
 And—that was a story to Nell old and hoary;
 Nell shrugged with a gesture resigned;
 A lustful and bestial man, just like the rest
 Of his sex . . .

And she made up her mind.

Averting her face, she escaped his embrace
 And whispered, "Wait here for a minute—"
 A prearranged sign brought a fresh jug of wine
 To Doug—with a sleeping drug in it.
 Dougal, gleaming of eye, the glass lifted high
 And drank it down, swiftly and deep;
 In no time at all, he lay there asprawl
 In impotent, stertorous sleep.

V

A pungent aroma jarred Doug from his coma
Much later. He lifted his head
To find he was not in the cool, shady grot
But in some sort of workshop, instead.
His senses were blurry, his tongue thick and furry;
He gagged at the odor and choked.
Then, head still awlirl, he noticed the girl,
And, "Nelly, where are we?" he croaked.

But the girl standing there with the bright yaller hair
Was hardly the girl of his dreams.
She was distant and cold, her manner was bold,
Her eyes glistened brightly with schemes.
With icy *élan* she spoke to the man
At Dougal's side, "Very well, Gurk,
He's come to his senses, let's drop the pretenses;
It's time we got down to our work."

"Work, Nell?" Dougal gasped, and confusedly clasped
His hammering head in his hands.
He learned, then, that he was bound, foot and knee,
To his seat by unbreakable bands.
Nell said with a numb, deadly smile, "Don't play dumb!
Be smart and you'll shorten this visit.
We know from your log you struck gold in the Bog;
Now, come clean and tell us—where is it?"

"G-gold?" gulped MacNeer. "Th-there's some mistake here!"
He grinned, "Aw, you're kidding me, honey!
Now, be a good sport—" The girl cut him short,
"I don't think this matter is funny!
I gave you a chance to go into your dance;
If you won't, why—" She shifted her eyes
To her white-coated aide. "Well, Gurk, I'm afraid
He must talk through the *menavise*."

As Doug MacNeer's eyes opened wide in surprise
Gurk drew from a nearby cask
A shimmering, fiery helmet of wire;
A sinister sort of mask.
Doug never had seen the fantastic machine
Before, but he'd oftentimes heard
Of the dreaded and hated device that translated
Men's thoughts into spoken words!

With a terrible cry of anger, on high
He lifted his brawny fists,
But an instrument clicked, and manacles snicked!
Like vises about his wrists.

"Well, *now* will you tell us?" persisted Nell.

"There's nothing to tell!" he said.

Nell's warm lips drew fine, and she made a brief sign . . .
And the helmet dropped over his head!

VI

It was Nell who depressed the stud that expressed
In flaming, electric flood
The current that boils its way through the coils
Of a menaviseal hood.

There was silence at first, then the silence burst
In a moment of horror fraught,
As Doug MacNeer's voice babbled clear
In fragments of tortured thought.

"I don't understand . . . I can't move a hand . . .

Head aches, and my brain is on fire . . .

Stars . . . Nelly . . . Oh, Lord!" Thus Dougal's thoughts poured

In words through the webwork of wire.

"Must be a mistake . . . I can't be awake

The orbit of Ceres is reckoned

At three-oh-oh-ten . . ." Nell stepped forward then.

"O.Q., Gurk—let up for a second!"

The shimmering died, and to Dougal she cried, .

"MacNeer, all we want to know

Is: *Where is the gold?* As soon as you've told

We promise to let you go."

"I've told you already," gasped Doug, unsteady.

"You're wrong if you think I'm rich—"

Nell's scarlet mouth curled. "Fool! Liar!" she snarled;

She viciously closed the switch.

Once again sallow flame trembled hot through the frame

Of the *menavise*; once again

Electrical stresses probed deep the recesses

Of Dougal's tormented brain.

"The torments of hell—but I never can tell . . .

A man must fight to the end . . .

My eyes—I've gone blind . . . my head . . . and my mind . . .

If I only . . . could only . . . bend . . ."

It is better to not reveal just what

Things Dougal said and did

In the hour or more that followed, for

Such secrets are better hid.

He babbled of dreams, and hopes and schemes,

And names long lost in the past;

He spoke of flight through the endless night,

And of cosmic reaches vast.

But never he told of wealth or gold,
 Though now he was growing weak;
 Till finally the girl turned to her churl
 Lips set, and as marble bleak.
 "He's stalled long enough!" she rasped. "He's tough,
 And he's held out for more than an hour;
 But I'm going to get that secret yet,
 If I have to turn on full power!"

Curk shook his head, and warningly said,
 "I wouldn't attempt it, Nell!
 'Twould be of no use, an ounce more juice
 Would blister his mind to hell.
 He's weak as a cat; if you try that—"
 He frowned—"After all that he's had,
 Another degree of power would be
 Sufficient to drive him mad!"

"That's up to him!" cried Nell, and grim
 Of eye she approached the side
 Of Doug MacNeer, and, "Listen here,
 You obstinate fool!" she cried,
 As she pressed the key to the last degree,
 "You know very well you told
 Me you'd found all the gold that a man could want
 —Now, answer: *Where is that gold?*"

The *menavise* flamed, the battered and maimed
 Hulk standing before them jerked
 As the blistering pain seared Dougal's brain,
 MacNeer's lips horribly worked . . .
 And across the tomblike expanse of the room
 His feeble answer carried:
 ". . . lonely as hell . . . must ask sweet Nell . . .
It's time I was getting married . . ."

"*I think that she . . . and I could be . . .
 So happy . . . a golden prize . . .*
 But . . . *Oh, the pain!*" And he screamed again,
 The light died out of his eyes.
 And Nell stood aghast, to have seen at last
 The terrible answer bare:
 The gold of his dream was the glorious stream
 Of her own bright yaller hair!

VII

So, stranger, if you should happen to
 Drop jets in the City of Krull
 By chance you may meet on a quiet street
 A man who with movements dull

Roams up and down through the little town
Like someone bewitched by a spell;
And the one at his side, his companion and guide
Is the lady once known as Nell.

For the woman who made of love a trade
And discovered true love too late
Has paid at last for the sins of her past
With Dougal MacNeer as her mate.
Her hair, that was gold, is streaked now with cold
White tendrils, but still she sighs
And she waits and she prays, through long, endless days,
For the light to return to his eyes.

For—Man in his lust for raw gold may thrust
From planet to asteroid,
But the Will of the Great Astronomer still
Is the Will of the cosmic void.
And whoever shall plot for another's lot,
Be he brother or foe or friend,
Who seeks his gain of a fellowman's pain
Must pay a price in the end.



THE THING OF VENUS

By Wilbur Peacock

On far-off steaming Venus, three Earthlings faced awful death. And the only man who could save them from the veiled planet's unknown THING was Kenton — disgraced, dope-sodden ex-Space Patrolman.

THE gailang gas hung in low soft waves over the motley crowd of the tiny, hidden gailang den. Laughter rose hysterically from the trio of women slummers, as the gas tore their natural reserves and modesty into shreds. A scarred space-pirate drooled over a handful of Martian moon-diamonds, the disruptor gun handy to his gnarled fist. The gas-tender, his flat nose buried in a tiny mask, watched the crowd of inscrutable eyes, his hands flickering, now and then, over the pet-cock studded panel before him.

Val Kenton lolled back in his padded booth, his eyes glazed with the drugging gas, his right hand fumbling aimlessly at the pipe resting on the battered table. His face was slack and whiskered, but even two months of lying drugged could not take the firmness from his mouth or the squareness from his jaw.

He didn't see the two men wearing the blue uniforms of the S.P. come in, nor did he feel their heavy hands as they lifted him between them. He was smiling slightly in his sleep, his subconscious completely concerned with a Martian dancing flower, when the two men tossed him into the rear seat of a cruiser and sent it speeding toward the grim forbidding walls of the S.P.'s prison.

VAL KENTON came to with the acrid bite of neutralizing gas twisting his stomach in violent nausea. He retched, turned on his side, reaching automatically for the gas-pipe. His hand encountered nothing, and he opened dazed eyes, stared uncomprehendingly around.

"Leave me alone!" he snarled, "I paid your bloody money for a private booth!"

A heavy palm smashed across his face, brought him, raging, to his feet. He

lashed out with both hands, felt a grip of steel on his shoulder whirl him and throw him back to the laced-steel bunk.

"Sober up, Kenton," a hard voice snapped, "I haven't got time to waste."

Val Kenton came slowly to a sitting position, rubbed his aching forehead with his hand, finally forced his bleary eyes to focus on the uniformed man standing so grimly before him.

The man was blocky, his grizzled hair a stiff shock above a craggy face. He wore the uniform of an S.P. colonel, with the triple bars that only a charter member of the Space Patrol could wear. His eyes were unfriendly as he stared at the unshaven, younger man before him, but deep in their gray depths was a terrified panic that he could not completely conceal.

"Snap out of it, Kenton," he barked.

Val Kenton swayed drunkenly to his feet, saluted insolently.

"Captain Val Kenton, of the Cruiser Pegasus, reporting for duty, sir," he said blurrily, mockingly, "Day's orders, sir?"

He stared about the cell, hate growing in his eyes, the jut of his chin becoming even more stubborn. His hand fumbled for a cigarette, and he lit it with a glow-lighter, as his gaze grew speculative.

"Well?" he prompted nastily.

"Look, Val," the colonel sat on the bunk edge. "I need your help."

Val Kenton laughed, and there was a deep hate and bitterness in the tones that brought the blood rushing to the patrolman's features.

"You go to hell, you damned, snobbish, slave-driver," Val Kenton snapped coldly, "you got me cashiered out of the Patrol; now I wouldn't like anything better than

Illustrated by Morey



to push a disruptor into your belt and press the firing stud!"

The blocky patrolman's knuckles were white, the muscles ridged and taut, but he kept his voice even and unruffled.

"I'm not asking for myself," he said grimly, "this is for Elise."

"Elise? What have I got to do with her any more?"

"She's marooned somewhere on Venus—may be dead on one of the islands." The colonel's voice broke despite his iron control. "For God's sake, Val," he finished desperately, "you've got to find her and bring her back!"

But Val Kenton was not listening. His mind was far away, drawing back the memories of long languorous nights beneath a tropical moon, remembering the soft shush-shush of waves lapping at the shore, of the whisper of the trade winds through tree fronds. He was recalling the lithe grace of Elise's slender body as they whirled to the muted strains of a hidden orchestra. He was conjuring back again the perfume of her hair and the softness of her voice as she whispered to him of her love and her plans.

And then he was back in the present, feeling the solid grip upon his shoulders, seeing the fear reflected in Matthew Barber's eyes. He felt the first twinge of fear himself, and his face hardened and grew stiff.

"Elise on Venus?" he asked, "what the devil is she doing there?"

"She went with Tony Andrews. He was finishing the job you started, and she stowed away in his ship. When I found the note she left, it was too late to do anything."

The blur of hate in Val Kenton's mind then was a savage thing that seemed to drain all strength from his body. He whirled, faced the gray stone wall, afraid the other would see the murder-lust that lay so near the surface of his eyes.

"To hell with Tony," he grated between set jaws, "he was the one who squealed on me!"

Colonel Barber's mouth tightened in distaste, and for one interminable second his hand toyed with the butt of his disruptor pistol; and then he was his old competent self again.

"He only did his duty, Val," he said

slowly, "after all, you broke your oath and the Interplanetary laws, when you smuggled those drugs and gasses from Mars."

VAL KENTON turned, blazing eyed, and so twisted were his features that the patrolman took an involuntary step backward.

"I swore I'd get him for that!" he spat sibilantly, "I swore I'd get revenge for what he did to me! And now this is my chance." He shook his head. "I'll not help rescue him," he stated flatly.

"But Lord, Val, you can't let Elise and Johnson, the chemist, die just because of an insane hate against a man who did not harm you maliciously!"

"I can and I will! Hell, what do I care what happens to them? Tony betrayed me, got me sent up for trial. Elise dropped me like a red-hot comet. And you cast the deciding vote that kicked me out of the service with a reputation that keeps me out of any ship that flies." His hand moved forcibly. "No, I'll never lift a hand to save any of you from anything!"

He slumped to the bunk, sucked absently on the cigarette, his wide shoulders shaking from the violent emotions that sped through his turbulent mind. He heard the sudden indrawn gasp of the colonel's breath, nurtured a turgid satisfaction that the other was in trouble with which he could not cope.

"You absolutely refuse to help find the girl you loved, and to endeavor to rescue her and the others?" Barber said tensely.

Sudden vicious slyness darkened Val Kenton's eyes. "I didn't say that," he countered, "before I make a definite decision, we've got a little talking to do."

"I'll promise anything within reason."

"I want back my old rating; I want command of the finest ship in the service; and I want a Presidential pardon."

Colonel Barber's face had aged twenty years; he was suddenly an old broken man. He shook his head slowly, defeat in his gray features.

"I can't do any of those things, Val," he said slowly, "and you know it. But I will bring all the weight I can swing your way, to clear your name and give you a new start."

Val Kenton laughed, but there was no

amusement in his eyes or features. "I've got you over a barrel," he snapped, "you've got to play my way. I'm the only living man who has ever penetrated Venus' cloud envelope, the only human who can find those islands and effect a rescue before Elise and Tony and Johnson starve to death—or are killed by attacking Venusians. And you've heard my demands; either meet them, or the whole Patrol can't find them in time to save their lives."

Colonel Barber shifted ponderously, his face like chiseled granite. "That is your final word?"

"That's my final word."

"But, Val—?"

"Get out, and leave me alone! Come back when everything is settled, and we'll talk business. Until then, don't bother me."

"You dirty, slimy little rat!" Colonel Barber slapped Val Kenton squarely across the mouth. "I thought maybe Elise was right, and that you had just gone crooked for a moment; but now I can see just what kind of a man you really are." He spat directly into the seated man's face. "I'll go myself, before I get on my knees to you!"

Val Kenton came lithely to his feet, and his driving fist rocked the old patrolman hard against the wall. He followed his advantage, smashing with both hands, his eyes sullen and hate-filling. He laughed aloud as blood spurted from Barber's face.

And then the patrolman rallied, striking back with the power and precision that came from forty years of Patrol work. His right hand slashed out, drove the lighter man aside, his left darting in for a neck blow that partially paralyzed Kenton's left arm.

They stood and slugged for seconds, their breathing harsh and strained, their hands like brutal bludgeons smashing—smashing—smashing.

And Colonel Barber's physical condition gave him the edge. He took the offensive, driving Val Kenton before him, releasing his grief and terror in a wild flurry of blows that stretched the other on the cement flooring.

Val Kenton went down, tried to force his arms to lift him again. There was a dull respect in his mind for the other man, but it vanished almost instantly as agony

from the patrolman's blows flooded his body. He shoved again with both hands on the floor, then crumpled into a fold of blackness that closed instantly over everything.

Colonel Barber leaned gaspingly against the wall, his eyes calmly speculative as he watched the feeble twitching of the unconscious Kenton. After a bit, he moved to the cell door, pounded for attention, gave quick orders when the guard arrived. Moments later, four guards carried Val Kenton's slack body out of the cell and up the ramp that led to the outside.

They placed Val Kenton as directed, then left silently, their eyes puzzled as they glanced at Colonel Barber bent over the notebook in the bright glow of the landing-field lights. Three minutes later, a scout cruiser fled with roaring jets into the blackness of star-sprinkled space. It took a high trajectory for seconds, then curved into a flattened arc that pointed a few degrees ahead of the green speck of light that was Venus, in the direction of the planet's flight.

Slowly, the rocket-blast dwindled in size until it was a tiny reddish speck in space. After a bit, even that was gone—and there was only the blackness of nothing, against which the stars shone like tiny diamonds on a black velvet drape.

VAL KENTON came slowly back to consciousness, his senses blurred and distorted. He opened his eyes, blinked dazedly when they caught sight of shiny familiar instruments on the panel before him. He tried to move, found that he was strapped to the cushions of the pilot seat. He licked dry lips, shook his head, wondering if the beating he had taken had driven him insane. He felt the steady rhythmic vibration of the pounding rockets in the ship, and he relaxed as suddenly as if a dam had broken within his mind.

He saw the note then, for the first time. It was clipped to the instrument panel, and was evidently a sheet of paper torn from a note book. He scowled thoughtfully, lifted it from the clip, tilted it a bit so that he could read it in the radi-light's glow.

"Val, (he read) you have no choice now. By the time you read this, I

will have issued orders for you to be shot on sight as a traitor. Your only chance to save your life lies in rescuing Elise and the others. I'm sorry that I must use this method of forcing you to do what you would do if you had not let your hate warp your mind as it has done.

"Elise and the others are marooned on an island they said was shaped like a turtle. Their radio went dead immediately after the single message.

"Find them and bring them back, Val, and I'll do everything in my power to clear your name.

BARBER."

VAL KENTON sat for a long time, reading and rereading the note, really understanding the gravity of the situation for the first time. He crumpled the note in his capable hand, gazed unseeingly about the tiny cabin.

And then anger drew white lines down his face, and his hands reached out to the controls to swing the ship toward Mars. He knew only too well how hopeless the task was that had been given him; not one man in a million had a chance to bring it to a successful conclusion.

His hands slowly relaxed then, dropping from the control studs, sinking back to his lap. He knew that he had no choice in the matter, for, should he not try, he would be disrupted into disassociated atoms by the first Patrol ship that sighted him and his tiny cruiser.

Slowly, the anger faded from his mind, and clear reasoning came in its place. His forehead washboarded with thought, and memories took a coherent pattern.

He remembered the turtle-shaped island now, recalling that it moved in the current of what he had called the North Flow. As to the present position, that could be found only by searching.

Val Kenton swore bitterly, tiredly.

Five years before, he would have welcomed the adventure and danger that faced him—but then he had had a brilliant future to look forward to, and he had had the vitality of youth with which to combat any danger. Now, he was but the hulk of the man he had been, his body shattered by the drugs he had used in ever increasing quantities for months. He had no future now, that is, a future of the type

and quality that might have been his; instead with his record, he could look forward to only a future of smuggling and piloting pirate craft, with a blasting death waiting for his first wrong move.

His expedition had been the last attempt to explore the water world of Venus. Five big expeditions had failed before him, their survivors never leaving the planet they had sought to conquer. He had succeeded in searching Venus and returning, only because he had never landed his ship on any of the floating islands that made up the only stable landing fields anywhere in the great wastes of water.

He had followed the currents of waters, mapping them as best he could, charting the islands that rode them like great boats, but some deep instinct had kept him from landing his ship. He had seen no signs of life on the planet, had found no traces of the expeditions that had preceded him. At last, satisfied that he could make a larger and more complete examination at a later date, he had swung out of the Venusian clouds and sent the rocket roaring toward his base on Mars. It was on his return to Earth from Mars that he had smuggled the drugs and gasses whose discovery had brought him before the Court Martial, where his rank and reputation had been stripped from him forever.

He recalled those memories now, and his features were hard and bitter. Then, as suddenly as though it had never been, the expression faded from his face, and he was grinning ruefully at his blurred reflection in the shiny surface of the cabin wall.

His deep eyes flicked almost casually over the complex instruments before him on the panel, and his mind instantly figured his position. His hands moved deftly over the studs, adjusting a few errors made by Colonel Barber in his haste; then he set the robot control and swung his pilot seat around to face the rear wall of the cabin.

He slid open a cabinet door, loosened his chest strap so that he might bend forward. He worked a cream into his stubbled face, used a paper towel to wipe away his beard. Then as best he could, using water sparingly, he gave himself a quick bath. Refreshed, he closed the cabinet, opened another at the first one's side. He

ate ravenously of the condensed food, finally leaning back with a sigh of repletion. He felt better now, felt better than he had in months. He had the pounding hull of a Patrol Cruiser beneath his feet, and he had a definite mission to complete—and it was only now that he realized how much he had missed both.

He refused to think upon the fact that he was a patrolman again only by virtue of his imagination, instead, preferring to forget the years that had passed so horribly since he had had any command.

He reached out, gave a half turn to the inner pane of the polaroid, quartzite port, felt contentment filling his mind when he gazed into the nothingness of space. He saw the swinging of the stars, caught sight of the blue Earth far behind. His hand fumbled for a cigarette, and he smoked it slowly, relishing the moment, feeling a presentiment that its equal might never come again.

He checked the automatic pilot again, then stretched back in his padded seat. His fingers fumbled at the switch that would flick on the "sleep" rays. For an interminable moment, he thought regretfully of the chaos he had made of his life. Then his finger tightened on the switch, and, as the nimbus of light swelled and pulsed from the protected globe above his head, drifted into a dreamless slumber that would end only when the cruiser was within the gravity field of Venus.

VENUS was no longer a green point of light; it loomed ahead like some cottony ball whirling in space. The Patrol Cruiser circled it warily, Val Kenton's fingers resting lightly on the control studs of the instrument panel. He whistled tunelessly, as he brought the ship in closer and closer.

He pressed a firing stud, and the rocket ship nosed down toward the clouds below. For the first time in hours, there was a sense of movement as the batts of clouds rushed up to meet the ship. Now there was something breath-taking in the way that the cruiser seemed to be dropping.

The first tendrils of hazy clouds whipped about the ship. The thrumming of the rockets rose to a higher crescendo, and the force-screen's voltmeter leaped higher

as the friction of the clouds tried to cremate the flashing ship.

And then there was only a gray darkness, all of the light of space nullified by the thicknesses of clouds.

Val Kenton sent the ship lower, his fingers playing over the studs like a master pianist playing a piano. He handled the ship with the instinctive ability that had made him famous as a patrolman.

Moments flowed one into the other, and the clouds seemed to press against the quartzite ports with a visible strength. Then the ship was through the clouds, and a thousand feet below the majestic ocean tossed and tumbled in a silent display of strength and ruthlessness that was spine-tingling to see.

Val Kenton's breath exploded with a tiny sigh of relief.

He felt again that sense of silent awe at the unreality of the scene below. For contrary to general belief, there was light on the surface of Venus. Because of the miles-deep thicknesses of clouds, scientists had long stated that there could be no illumination on the water-planet's surface.

On his first trip to Venus, Val Kenton had dispelled that conjecture; he had discovered that the sea was alive with an incredibly tiny marine worm. These worms glowed with the will o' the wisp paleness of a firefly, and the light generated by the billions of worms was reflected back from the low clouds with a pale brilliance that was startling.

Val Kenton remembered his first sight of the glowing ocean, felt again the thrill that had first touched his heart. He swung the space cruiser toward the north pole, peered tensely from the port. Beneath him, the milky ocean was a shifting, white-capped wash of silvery light, gleaming with a phosphorescent sheen, its turbulence a shifting kaleidoscope of shattered, intermingled colors glowing with every tint of the spectrum.

Val Kenton gasped suddenly; for, exploding from the water in a spray that resembled fire, a scaly blunt something suddenly appeared. For one second, its three hundred foot body was black against the water, and then, majestically, it slid from sight into the depths again.

Val Kenton whistled soundlessly, tensed with sudden horror, realizing how horrible

an antagonist the creature could make against the puny frailty of a human.

He sent the ship hurtling northward, ever, ever faster, eyes seeking for one of the few islands that dotted the boundless ocean. For more than an hour, he sped, a thousand feet in the air, feeling fatigue clutching at him, his eyes growing strained and tired.

In the second hour of flight, he sighted the first island. He circled it warily, eagerly looking for the expedition's ship, feeling futility beating at him when he found nothing in the green, luxuriant jungle growth to show that humans had ever landed there.

He spun the ship in a tight circle, sent it flashing to the west, toward a low bit of blackness that hugged the water line. His eyes lighted, when he finally made out the turtle-like outline of the island. His lips were firm and his gaze intent as he circled the island slowly, searching for the blot of brightness that would be the terrestrial ship.

He saw it at last, tucked beneath the fronds of gigantic ferns, sent the cruiser roaring over it several times, hoping the rockets' echoes would bring any survivors into the open. His features tightened, when no one appeared, and he peered about for a landing place for his ship.

And as he turned, his sleeve caught on a knife switch, pulled it open.

There was an instant, gargantuan explosion of auxiliary rockets, and the Patrol cruiser went corkscrewing toward the island in an insane dive.

Val Kenton went utterly white, his hands darting for the controls, panic driving every bit of expression from his face. He cut all rockets with a swoop of one hand, then fired the two nose tubes in a frantic attempt to spin the ship into the air again.

He sensed, rather than saw, the upward rush of the tangled plants below. One second, he had, in which to regret the lack of precision caused by his drug-steeped body, and then the cruiser plowed into the jungle-like growth.

He was wrenched from his seat, the safety belts parting like rotten thread, and then he was smashed against the forward bulkhead. His hands groped feebly for support, and then he sagged unconscious,

his body tossed back and forth in the tiny cabin as the ship plowed through the interlaced branches and vines to the muddy ground two hundred feet below.

With one final bounce, the Patrol ship struck the ground, slid on its side for a few yards, then came to a grinding halt, its nose crumpling a trifle as it smashed into the great trunk of a tree.

VAL KENTON groaned feebly, opened his eyes to stare uncomprehendingly about the cabin of the rocket ship. He lay for seconds against the curved wall, utterly unnerved by the horror of that last flashing moment. He was afraid to move, certain that his injuries would be such that he would have been better off had he died in the crash.

At last, he moved his arms and legs tentatively, swearing amazedly when he found that, other than terrible aching bruises, he was unhurt. He came to his feet, examined the instrument panel, marvelling that his last conscious act had been the closing of switches on the panel.

He moved slowly, unscrewed the back panel, wriggled into the confines of the rocket chambers in the tail of the ship. He shook his head dully, when he discovered the fused catalyst feed. So seldom was such an accident, the ship's repair locker held nothing that could replace the feed.

He crawled back into the control cabin, slumped in the pilot's seat, fumbled for a cigarette. He felt whipped then, felt beaten in a way that he had never sensed. And then, moments later, he ground out the cigarette, opened the weapon cabinet.

He buckled on the twin hand guns at his waist, slung a disruptor rifle over his shoulder, then filled his pockets with condensed food. He filled a canteen, looped it over his free shoulder, stood for a long moment peering around the safety of the cabin.

Then he uncogged the entrance port, dropped lightly to the spongy ground. He crouched where he had fallen, his eyes flicking through the tangled growth, the twin guns in his hands, as he waited for the slight sound that might betoken a hidden enemy. He felt perspiration gathering on his forehead, dashed it away with the back of one hand. The air was

sweet in his nostrils after the renewed air of the ship, and when he came slowly to his feet, he felt a surge of power in his body such as he had never known, due to the weakness of the gravity.

He moved from the safety of the ship, flicked the control of one gun until it gave only a narrow, slicing beam. He used the gun as an Earth native might use a bush knife, the pale beam cutting a path soundlessly before him. He moved swiftly along the path he created, alert for the first signs of danger, glancing now and then at the compass strapped to his wrist.

For minute after minute he walked, his mind intent with the problem that faced him. No longer was it a simple attempt to rescue three people from an unfriendly planet; now, if he failed, his life would be forfeit along with the others. His only chance of success lay in finding the others' ship and removing its catalyst feed for replacement of his wrecked one. That is, if the expedition's ship was so damaged that it could not fly, which was self-evident.

Val Kenton spat thoughtfully, paced steadily forward. He sensed vague superstitious terror tugging at his mind when he felt the matted jungle pressing at him from all sides. He peered about, wonder in his eyes, when he saw the gigantic ferns and strange unreal trees that grew in lush aboriginal splendor. He stopped in horror, when the blood-red blossom of a monster plant bent toward him, recognizing that it must be some weirdly evolved cousin of the fly-trap plant on Earth.

He side-stepped instinctively, stopped with his back against the scaly trunk of a giant fern. For the plant stretched toward him to the full extent of its pale stem, and he could see, deep within the orifice of the crimson blossom, an oozing of juices from back in the cup.

Val Kenton gagged at the simple horror of the blind insensate greed of the plant. He lifted his disruptor, drew the knife edge of its beam in a slashing movement across the stem. There was the faint vibration of a shrill note from the plant, then sap spurted from the severed stem—pumping as though from a beating heart!

"My God!" Val Kenton whispered to himself. "It's alive—like an animal."

And then, even as he watched, corrup-

tion bloated the carnivore plant and it collapsed into itself. Val Kenton grimaced, turned away. He swung his disruptor, clearing more path, jumped startledly when he felt something clutch at his ankle. He sprang aside, whirled, his weapon ready. He froze again into motionlessness.

For the monster plant was growing with incredible speed from the roots still imbedded in the swampy ground. A blind creeper swung like a cobra's head in a stealthy search for its prey, and then lifted high, a new monster blossom springing into being from the tip of the creeper. Within seconds, another flower surged against its stem in a futile attempt to reach the Earthman.

Val Kenton wiped the perspiration from his face, backed away from the plant. He shuddered involuntarily, blasted the entire plant out of existence with a sudden movement of his disruptor. Then, his eyes searching the jungle for more alien dangers, he began again to cut a path toward the expedition ship far across the island.

A shadow crossed his vision, and he glanced up to see something that looked like a cross between a fish and a bat flash between the heavy fronds of the fern-tops high overhead. He watched it for a moment, wondering if it were dangerous, then shrugged ruefully. If it were vicious, he would find out about it sooner or later.

His disruptor cleared a path then into a small clearing. He stepped out of the jungle, rested for a moment from the heavy walking, rechecking his compass bearing. It was then that he heard the startled cracks of high-powered disruptor rifles firing from a short distance away.

WHIRLING, he went in the direction of the sound, his twin guns clearing tangled vines and creepers from his path so swiftly that he went forward at a run. Cold sweat bathed his body, but his mind seemed to be a detached entity that watched the entire happening with a calm unhurried interest.

He didn't know why he ran; he had no particular reason to race to the rescue of the Earthpeople ahead—but the instinctive reactions of years of being a patrolman would not be denied.

He stumbled as he ran, his feet slipping and sliding in the ooze that lay but a few inches beneath the surface of the ground. His breath grew ragged in his throat, and a pain knifed at his side, but he kept up his steady running for minutes.

At last, he burst from the matted jungle into a clearing that led to the water's edge. He came to a stop, the sudden cessation of movement sending him to his hands and knees. From that position, he rolled until he was sitting, and the twin guns roared a steady stream of death at the fantastic creatures surging toward the half-buried space ship close at hand.

The Venusian creatures were like things out of a nightmare. They scuttled toward the ship like crabs on great jointed legs. Their bodies were covered with hair, and the marine worms within the hair made the beasts glow like great fluorescent lights.

Each had a globular body, from which a great pupilless eye stared blindly at the ship. They attacked in wave after wave, their numbers rolling from the turbulent sea in an apparently inexhaustible stream. The only sound they made was an almost inaudible scream that drove through Val Kenton's brain like a needle of fire.

He swung his guns, blasting creature after creature out of existence, shuddering at the horribleness of the scene, wondering if the creatures could ever be stopped.

Disruptors roared from the ship; but the angle made by the ship's landing was such that accurate firing was impossible. The shots flashing from the control cabin's ports could cover but a small portion of the attackers.

Val Kenton fired with increasing speed, the disruptor ray clearing a ragged hole in the monsters. In a detached sort of way, he saw one of the furry crabs clamber up the side of the ship. He saw it squat and a blue liquid pour from its body. He blew the creature into atoms, gaped in amazement when he saw the hole the liquid had eaten in the Permalloy metal of the ship. Incredulity lay deep in his eyes—for he knew only too well that even hydrofluoric acid had no effect on the metal of which patrol cruisers were made.

And then he was too busy to think. The Venusian beasts turned as though by an instinctive command and hurtled to-

ward himself. He lifted his guns, erased the leaders as fast as they came. One gun went dead in his hand, and the ray of the other paled into redness. He came to his feet, dropped the hand guns, whipped the rifle from his back. He drew the muzzle flame like a spray of water across the screaming horrors that plunged at him, his mouth open in a soundless snarl, his eyes narrowed and vicious.

And so suddenly that he did not comprehend it for a moment, the attack was over, the nightmarish Venusians streaming back into the sea. Within a split-second, except for the obscene twitching of dead beasts on the steaming ground, the beach was empty.

VAL KENTON sank onto his heels, unclamped his stiff fingers from the rifle. He fumbled for a cigarette, lit it, his breath hard and shallow. He felt reaction set in, and momentarily wished that he had a whiff of gailang gas to steady his nerves.

There was the clanging of metal on metal from the ship, and a man's head came cautiously into view. It stayed that way for a moment, and then a man in the uniform of a Patrol Captain clambered out of the port.

"Good God!" the Earthman heard the Captain say, "It's Val Kenton who was doing the damage outside!"

Val Kenton laughed then, chuckled with a dryness that was rather horrible to hear. Never, had he expected again to find himself a welcome friend of a Space Patrolman. And the fact that he had this Captain owing him gratitude struck him as ironically amusing.

But his laughter stilled almost instantly, when he saw the remembered features of the Captain. And the hate that had lain so deep within him for years flared into a white heat that seemed to cramp the muscles of his body.

"It's Val Kenton," he called. "And you owe me your life, you damned squealer!"

In that one instant, it took every bit of his self-control not to lift the rifle in his lap and blow the other into nothingness.

And then the moment was over, and he was coming to his feet, feeling the thudding of his heart in his chest, as Elise

Barber came through the port and dropped lightly to the ground.

"Val!" Elise cried, and the gladness of her tone brought an agony of pain to the emotion he had thought he had stifled forever.

Val Kenton picked up his dropped guns, holstered them. He went forward slowly, the rifle swinging in one relaxed hand. Despite himself, he felt a thrill of companionship at the warmth of Tony Andrews's handshake.

"Hello, Tony," he said quietly.

"Hello, Val," the Patrolman answered. "Man, it's good to see you!"

Elise caught Val Kenton's hand, drew him toward the ship.

"Let's not stand out here," she said impulsively. "Come inside, where we can talk." She drew a deep breath, her blue eyes sparkling. "Oh, it's good for the three of us to be together again!"

Val Kenton's smile was stiff and mechanical, as they clambered through the port into the ship's interior. He, too, felt the completeness of the moment; yet, deep in his mind, he knew that the old days of friendly camaraderie were gone forever.

THEY sat in the comparatively large cabin of the expedition ship, cigarettes glowing, each trying to ease the tension that lay within them all. Val Kenton sat in the co-pilot's seat, the lines of five years of dissipation clearly etched in his tired face, his clothes torn and stained. He talked jerkily, trying to avoid the bad points of the past few days, striving to make the situation appear more bearable.

"It will be a fairly simple job to fix my cruiser," he said slowly. "Tony and I will use the catalyst feed from this ship to replace my fused one."

Tony Andrews grinned, laughter wrinkles in the corners of his clear eyes. He was trim and fit in his uniform, and there was an air of competence and adventurousness in his compact body.

"We could use this entire ship for spare parts," he said ruefully. "It will never fly again, after the damage those blasted Venusians did to it with that super digestive juice they discharged."

Johnson, the expedition's chemist, glanced up from a sheet of notes he had taken from his pocket. His eyes were

mild and calm as he peered at Val Kenton.

"Most amazing thing I've ever seen," he commented. "The digestive juices of those crab-creatures will eat through glass as fast as water will move through tissue paper." He frowned. "It's just possible," he finished, thoughtfully, "that the liquid is in the nature of a weapon—particularly so, since those animals used it in an effort to reach us within the ship."

Elise shuddered. "Please," she said, "talk about something more cheerful! I can still see those hideous eyes staring at us just the way they did during that attack."

Val Kenton nodded cheerfully, filling his senses with the beauty and radiance of the girl. It came to him now as never before how much he had lost when he had turned traitor to himself and his oath.

"Well, for a starter, what did you discover before you were disabled?"

Johnson came to his feet, picked up a rifle. "I'll take a look at some of those bodies outside," he said. "I'm just a chemist, but maybe I can pick up a few facts that will be of some use to the next expedition to visit here."

He clambered through the port, the sounds of his shoes on the metal strangely loud. Behind him, he left a rather strained silence, which was broken at last by Tony Andrews.

"This is the story," he began quietly. "The trip to Venus was just routine. We dropped through the clouds, following," he nodded at Val Kenton, "your directions. We were over such a sea as we had never seen before. There was no sign of life or land. I dropped floats, to determine the currents, and then swung the ship toward the North. We found the first island within an hour. I landed the ship, intending to explore, and such was our incredible luck landed almost on top of the first expedition ship to touch Venus."

Val Kenton drew in a sharp breath. "What did you find inside?"

Tony Andrews shook his head ruefully. "Not a thing," he admitted, "I searched the ship, which was split and ruptured beyond description, and didn't find a scrap of paper or clothing—or a vestige of human remains."

"The crabs?" Val Kenton asked.

Tony Andrews shrugged. "It's pos-

sible! Well, the discovery excited us, and we took the ship aloft again, without exploring the island further. For hours, we went from island to island, seeking for signs of life. We found the wrecked remains of three other ships, and all of them as completely empty as the first. We didn't know what to make of it; we couldn't figure out any logical reason for the ships having been so completely gutted."

"You don't think the survivors could have set up a hidden camp somewhere to wait for rescue?" Val Kenton asked grimly.

"No! In the first place, the ships made better living places than any they could build; and second, we found no signs of such a habitation on any of the islands."

"What happened on this island, that you should become marooned?"

"It happened so fast, I couldn't avoid it. We landed on this beach, and were making preparations to explore, when those crabs attacked for the first time. We found out that we weren't safe, only when a great section of the rocket-tube housing gave way because of the powerful, acid-like juice the crabs exuded. I radioed for help immediately, and then the radio went dead. For the past five days, we've been fighting off those beasts at regular intervals."

Elise sighed deeply in relief, smiled at Val Kenton. "Thank heaven, it's over now," she said feelingly. "Now, after fixing the other ship, we can get back to Earth—and none too soon to please me!"

Tony Andrews flicked ashes from his cigarette, grinned. "What rescue ship did you bring, Val, one of the freighters?" he asked.

Val Kenton shook his head, his eyes diamond hard. He watched the tiny smile of happiness about Elise's curved lips for a moment, then swung his gaze to the Patrolman's hardening face.

"It's a scout cruiser, Tony," he said easily. "It was the only ship I could get."

Val Kenton laughed inwardly to himself then, laughed at the irony of the situation, knowing the horror that must be spreading through the other's mind. He rocked a bit from his inner mirth, and a savage satisfaction filled his mind momentarily.

For both he and Tony Andrews knew that, even with the full power of the rocket tubes, the single man cruiser could never carry four passengers back to safety. It might be able to lift into space with three people cramped into the one man cabin—but never with four!

One person must be left behind!

And Val Kenton had already decided who that person must be! It was to be Tony Andrews who was to be marooned to a certain death—left on Venus because of the hate Val Kenton felt for him because of the report he had made to the Patrol five years before.

MOMENTS passed, moments in which no one spoke, and in which Val Kenton could see dreadful realization growing in the Patrolman's eyes. Val Kenton laughed even more to himself, seeing the fear rising in the other man, knowing the horrible terror that the other must be experiencing.

Elise sensed but dimly the thoughts that were racing through the minds of the men seated before her. She gazed from one to the other with eyes that grew wide and slightly fearful.

"Is something wrong?" she asked suddenly. "Can't the rescue ship be fixed?"

Tony Andrews smiled then, smiled with stiff lips, his eyes bright and confident. "Nothing is wrong," he said, "we'll be safe on Earth before you know it."

A disruptor rifle cracked loudly, the sound whipping in through the open port.

Tony Andrews snapped to his feet. "Trouble!" he barked, "Elise, you stay here; come on, Val!"

Val Kenton paused only long enough to slip newly charged loads into his guns, then swung through the port after the fleet patrolman. He dropped from the port onto the spongy ground, crouched there, his eyes searching the edge of the water for signs of the charging crab-beasts.

He straightened slowly, seeing no signs of danger, stared at Johnson and Andrews nearby.

"Sorry, to startle you like that," Johnson said, "one of those crabs stuck a pincer out of the water, and I took a snapshot at him."

Val Kenton laughed, relaxed with a

sigh of pent-up air. "Glad it wasn't any worse than that," he said relievedly, "I'm not much in a mood for a fight."

Tony Andrews' gun snapped to his shoulder, and the concussion of the shot sounded strangely flat and deadly. In the water's edge, a furry crab floundered and threshed in savage death throes.

And then the water seemed to come alive with the Venusian crabs. They scuttled onto the bank from the silver water, their bodies glowing with eerie phosphorescent sheen, their cries ear-piercing.

Val Kenton laughed aloud, swung his twin hand guns into line, flicked their power onto full force. He stood shoulder to shoulder with Johnson and Andrews, and the combined fire of their guns cut a swathe of death in the charging ranks that broke the attack almost at its onset.

"Remember Mars, when we cleaned out the Truds?" Tony Andrews yelled over the blasting of the guns.

Val Kenton grinned, said nothing, but he felt a sharp nostalgia for those days so long gone in which he and Tony had fought side by side on far-off planets.

And then another gun added its fire from the port of the ship; and the crabs scuttled back toward the water.

"Hurrah for us!" Elise cried gaily from over their heads, and then her voice broke in sudden horror.

For rising from the ocean, coming out of the water as though the water itself was rising in a great lump, came **SOME-THING!**

It had no shape, no arms, no features—yet it was alive. It moved sluggishly toward the bank like a great solidified wave that towered a hundred feet in the air. It glowed with the phosphorescent fire of the ocean, and preceding it came a tangible aura of unspeakable menace.

"God!" Johnson croaked, "what is it?"

Val Kenton holstered his handguns, caught up his rifle, blasted a charge of unleashed energy into the vast bulk rising from the ocean. The thing seemed to jump, and the flame of the shot glowed deep within its bulk.

Then it settled again, without sound, moved closer to the beach.

"It's alive!" Val Kenton gasped, and knew instinctively why the other expeditions' ships were crushed and empty hulls on Venus.

The thing was a great blob of gelatinous substance that quivered and shook as it approached the land. Val Kenton fired twice more, gaped in incredulous surprise when the atomic fire did absolutely nothing in the way of stopping it.

He backed slowly from the water's edge, the other men moving backward as though by common consent; and they stopped only when their shoulders touched the ship.

The sea-thing was almost at the beach now. It halted its forward movement momentarily; and a pseudopod flicked from its glowing surface and settled over the shattered body of a great crab. One second the pseudopod settled there, and then was withdrawn with incredible speed.

And where the crab had been was nothing.

"Protoplasm!" Johnson gasped, "it's living protoplasm!"

Val Kenton felt a dull horror clutching at his heart. He had seen experiments with tiny bits of living protoplasm, and he knew the insatiable appetite of the mindless thing. But never in even his most horrible of dreams had he visioned a blob of sentient life that was fully a hundred yards in diameter and which must have weighed hundreds of tons.

The protoplasm touched the beach, seemed to flow out of the water. Living ropes of itself flipped out of itself, settled over the living and dead crabs; and an instant later the pseudopods flipped back and the ground was bare and sterile.

Val Kenton fired again and again, then stopped in sheer futility. For although his shots had blown bits of the creature away—each of the bits moved with insatiable greed the moment it lit, always flowing toward the nearest source of food.

And then the crabs were gone, and the protoplasm was flowing like warm, whitely-glowing tar toward the four Earth people and their ship.

VAL KENTON whirled, took charge of the situation as though he was still the patrolman he had once been. He

jerked his head toward the open port.

"Tony," he snapped, "get inside and bring out that catalyst feed. We can't fight this thing for long; we've got to make a run for it."

The patrolman moved without hesitation, swinging into the port, leaving his guns outside. His face was strained and white as he cast one last look at the hungry horror that moved so slowly, so implacably, up the beach.

Val Kenton set the control on his rifle. "Set your guns for flame," he said sharply, whirled and helped Elise to the ground, "we haven't enough power for atomic fire for any length of time; our only hope lies in holding that thing at bay until Tony gets the feed."

They stood, the three of them, shoulder to shoulder at the ship's side, and their guns hissed like high pressure jets as they fired in unison at the insensate monster.

Steam rose and swelled from the protoplasm, and the great blob seemed to draw back. Val Kenton felt a flame of exultation flare momentarily in his heart. "Maybe?" he whispered to himself.

Then the weird cohesive slime surged forward again. The three guns raved and wailed with unleashed power, and the steam and horrible odor filled the air. Great areas of the protoplasm disappeared under the continuous fire, but the power of the guns was not enough to stop the horror from its relentless advance.

It moved faster now, seeming to have had new energy released within it from the dozens of crab bodies it had assimilated, and its pseudopods were great flicking blind loops of death questing before it for further sustenance.

The rifles went dead, and the two men and the girl lifted the hand guns. The flame from the guns did not have the power of the rifles, and the terror moved even closer. A four foot blob of protoplasm shot from the main body, smashed into the ship, dropped toward the three below. Johnson flicked it out of existence with full power from his gun, and the gun went dead.

"Tony!" Val Kenton yelled, fighting the fear that cramped at his muscles, when he saw the instant holes eaten in the ship's side.

And then Tony Andrews was dropping

from the port, and they were sprinting toward the tunnel Val Kenton had disrupted in the jungle two hours before.

They gasped as they ran, their feet stumbling on the vine and creepers that had grown with incredible speed in the tunnel. They glanced back in time to see the tunnel's end blocked off by the surging protoplasm. There was the rending sound of trees and ferns being crushed behind them, and they ran ever faster.

"It can move almost as fast as we," Val gasped.

Elise fell, was brought to her feet by Johnson's clutching hand. The entire group ran as they had never run before in their lives, fighting their way through the jungle, blood spurting from innumerable cuts, their lungs clamoring for air.

And then they were in a tiny clearing, and Val Kenton was clutching Tony Andrews' sleeve.

"Let them go on," he half-screamed, "Johnson can fit the feed; we'll try to hold that thing back for a moment or two."

Tony Andrews nodded, gasped out instructions for Johnson to follow. Elise whirled when she heard the orders, came close to the Patrolman, held him tight.

"Hurry, Tony," she cried. "Don't take any more chances than you must." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "You know that I'd hate to lose a husband on our honeymoon."

"Husband?" Val Kenton gasped incredulously.

Tony Andrews nodded. "Yes, we were married just before we started; this was to be our honeymoon."

Val Kenton didn't move, but his hate then was a terrible thing that shook him with its intensity. Now he had a double reason for slaying this dishevelled man who stood at his side. He forced his voice to remain comparatively calm, seeking to hide the feelings that tortured him.

"Run," he said to Elise and Johnson, "we haven't much time."

And then Val Kenton and Tony Andrews were alone in the clearing, and the sounds of the flowing death behind them grew louder as the seconds passed.

Val Kenton backed to one side, watched with flame-bright eyes as the Patrolman

lifted his gun in a futile attempt to stall the monster for precious seconds. He lifted his own gun, centered it on the Patrolman's broad back, and his finger tightened on the firing stud.

He fired—and in the same split second that he fired, a great crimson hood flashed down over his head and body and tightened about his waist, pinning his arms to his sides.

VAL KENTON screamed then, his cry reverberating into his ears as the monster, carnivorous flower tightened its grasp. He smelled the sickly sweet odor of the blossom, and giddiness tugged at his senses. His body surged again and again in a futile attempt to break the rubbery-like tension of the plant, fought agonizedly when he felt the first exquisite agony of the digestive juice biting into his shoulder.

Then he was free, retching in the clean air, his body being helped erect by Tony Andrews' firm hands.

"Whew!" Tony Andrews breathed raggedly, "I thought you were a goner for a moment!"

Val Kenton straightened then, reading something in the clear eyes of his former friend that he had thought he would never see again in the eyes of any man. He fought the lump in his throat for seconds, then whirled.

"Let's get to the ship," he said. "It's foolish to try and do anything here."

They dodged down the path, the fetid odor of the pursuing protoplasm following them on the light wind. Val Kenton thought many things then, the thoughts racing through is mind with quicksilver-like speed. And in those flashing seconds, he found the answers to many things that he had refused to face in the past.

And then they were at the ship, and Elise was waiting at the port.

"Tony," she called, "Johnson can't make the adjustment; he needs your help."

Val Kenton caught the Patrolman's arm in a grip of steel. "Give me your coat and cap," he snapped, "and get into the pilot's seat." He swallowed heavily.

"Get Johnson into the control cabin with you. I'm going into the rear emergency port, and repair that jet. I don't know if the ship will carry all of us, but you've got to make the try. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but—" Tony Andrews began puzzledly.

"No time for talk," Val Kenton snapped. "I'll brace myself in that repair space, and tap when I'm ready. After that, it's up to you."

He shrugged into the Patrolman's coat and cap, straightened his shoulders in the familiar set of the coat.

He spun on one heel, went toward the emergency port, then retraced his steps. "Will you shake hands, Tony?" he asked.

A moment later, he climbed into the port, his eyes blurred because of his emotion at the warm pressure of Tony Andrews' hand. He squirmed into position, fought with the stubborn catalyst feed. Within seconds, he had it fixed. He drew a deep breath, then pounded the agreed signal on the metal bulkhead.

THE Patrol cruiser staggered a bit in its upward flight, then fled for the clouds high over the water world. And at the moment of its takeoff, the monster blob of protoplasm burst through the surrounding trees, halted as though it knew its prey had escaped. Then it moved a bit, and a blind pseudopod came questing from its body.

Val Kenton watched it move toward him, and he waited its coming unflinchingly. He stood straight and proud, the Patrol cap cocked jauntily on his head, his shoulders square in the blue coat that bore the crossed comets of the Patrol Service.

He lit a cigarette, watched the protoplasm coming ever closer. He fired the last charge in his gun, laughed aloud at the instant withdrawal of the pseudopod.

He saluted gravely, as he had done years before. Then, the cigarette canted in firm lips, he went forward—a Captain in the Space Patrol moving forward, never backward, facing danger as tradition demanded.

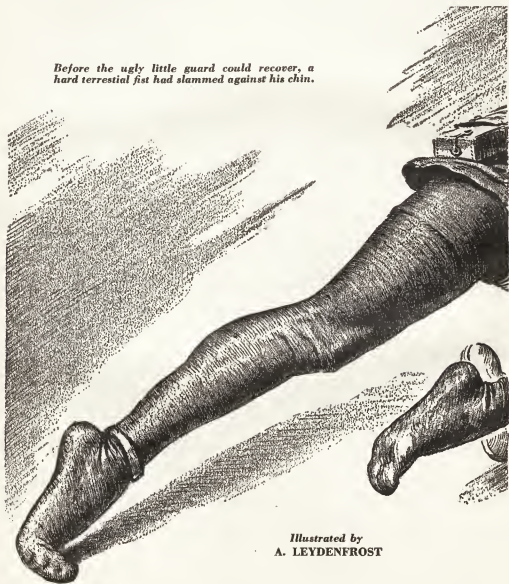
Pied Piper of Mars

By **FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER, Jr.**

Elath Taen made mad music for the men of Mars. The red planet lived and would die to the soul-tearing tunes of his fiendish piping.

IN all the solar system there is no city quite like Mercis, capital of Mars. Solis, on Venus, is perhaps more beautiful, some cities of Earth certainly have more drive and dynamitism, but there is a strange inscrutable air about Mercis which even terrestrials of twenty years' residence cannot explain. Outwardly a tourists'

Before the ugly little guard could recover, a hard terrestrial fist had slammed against his chin.



Illustrated by
A. LEYDENFROST



mecca, with white plastoid buildings, rich gardens, and whispering canals, it has another and darker side, ever present, ever hidden. While earthmen work and plan, building, repairing, bringing their vast energy and progress to decadent Mars, the silent little reddies go their devious ways, following ancient laws which no amount of terrestrial logic can shake. Time-bound ritual, mysterious passions and hates, torturous, devious logic . . . all these, like dark winding underground streams run beneath the tall fair city that brings such thrilled superlatives to the lips of the terrestrial tourists.

Steve Ranson, mounting the steps of the old house facing the Han canal, was in no mood for the bizarre beauties of Martian scenery. For one thing, Mercis was an old story to him; his work with Terrestrial Intelligence had brought him here often in the past, on other strange cases. And for another thing, his mission concerned more vital matters. Jared Haller, as head of the state-owned Martian Broadcasting System, was next in importance to the august Governor Winship himself. As far back as the Hitlerian wars on earth it had been known that he who controls propaganda, controls the nation . . . or planet. Martian Broadcasting was an important factor in controlling the fierce warlike little reddies, keeping the terrestrial-imposed peace on the red planet. And when Jared Haller sent to Earth for one of the Terrestrial Intelligence, that silent efficient corps of trouble-shooters, something was definitely up.

The house was provided with double doors as protection against the sudden fierce sandstorms which so often, in the month of Tol, sweep in from the plains of Psidis to engulf Mercis in a red choking haze. Ranson passed the conventional electric eye and a polite robot voice asked his name. He gave it, and the inner door opened.

A smiling little Martian butler met him in the hall, showed him into Haller's study. The head of M.B.C. stood at one end of the big library, the walls of which were lined with vivavox rolls and old-fashioned books. As Ranson entered, he swung about, frowning, one hand dropping to a pocket that bulged unmistakably.

"Ranson, Terrestrial Intelligence." The special agent offered his card. "You sent

to Earth a while ago for an operator?"

Jared Haller nodded. He was a big, rough-featured individual with gray leonine hair. A battering-ram of a man, one would think, who hammered his way through life by sheer force and drive. But as Ranson looked closer, he could see lines of worry, of fear, etched about the strong mouth, and a species of terror within the shaggy-browed eyes.

"Yes," said Jared Haller. "I sent for an operator. You got here quickly, Mr. Ranson!"

"Seven days out of earth on the express-liner *Arrow*." Ranson wondered why Haller didn't come to the point. Even Terrestrial Intelligence headquarters in New York hadn't known why a T. I. man was wanted on Mars . . . but Haller was one of the few persons sufficiently important to have an operator sent without explanation as to why he was wanted. Ranson put it directly. "Why did you require the help of T. I., Mr. Haller?" he asked.

"Because we're up against something a little too big for the Mercian police force to handle." Jared Haller's strong hands tapped nervously upon the desk. "No one has greater respect for our local authorities than myself. Captain Maxwell is a personal friend of mine. But I understood that T. I. men had the benefit of certain amazing devices, remarkable inventions, which make it easy for them to track down criminals."

Ranson nodded. That was true. T. I. didn't allow its secret devices to be used by any other agency, for fear they might become known to the criminals and outlaws of the solar system. But Haller still hadn't told what crime had taken place. This time Ranson applied the spur of silence. It worked.

"Mr. Ranson," Haller leaned forward, his face a gray grim mask, "someone, something, is working to gain control of the Martian Broadcasting Company! And I don't have to tell you that whoever controls M.B.C. controls Mars! Here's the set-up! Our company, although state-owned, is largely free from red-tape, so long as we stress the good work we terrestrials are doing on Mars and keep any revolutionary propaganda off the airwaves. Except for myself, and half a dozen other earthmen in responsible posi-

tions, our staff is largely Martian. That's in line with our policy of teaching Mars our civilization until it's ready for autonomy. Which it isn't yet, by quite some. As you know."

Ranson nodded, eyes intent as the pattern unfolded.

"All right." Haller snapped. "You see the situation. Remove us . . . the few terrestrials at the top of M.B.C. . . and Martian staff would carry on until new men came out from Earth to take our places. But suppose during that period with no check on their activities, they started to dish out nationalist propaganda? One hour's program, with the old Martian war-songs being played and some rabble-rouser yelling 'down with the terrestrial oppressors' and there'd be a revolution. Millions of reddies against a few police, a couple of regiments of the Foreign Legion. It'd be a cinch."

"But" . . . Ranson frowned . . . "this is only an interesting supposition. The reddies are civilized, peaceful."

"Outwardly," Haller snapped. "But what do you or any other earthmen know about what goes on in their round red heads? And the proof that some revolt is planned lies in what's been happening the past few weeks! Look here!" Haller bent forward, the lines about his mouth tighter than ever. "Three weeks ago my technical advisor, Rawlins, committed suicide. Not a care in the world, but he killed himself. A week later Harris, head of the television department, went insane. Declared a feud with the whole planet, began shooting at everyone he saw. The police rayed him in the struggle. The following week Pegram, the musical director, died of a heart attack. Died with the most terrorized expression on his face I've ever seen. Fear, causing the heart attack, his doctor said. You begin to see the set-up? Three men, each a vital power in M.B.C. gone within three weeks! And who's next? Who?" Jared Haller's eyes were bright with fear.

"Suicide, insanity, heart attack." Ranson shrugged. "All perfectly normal. Coincidence that they should happen within three weeks. What makes you think there's been foul play?"

For a long brittle moment Jared Haller stared out at the graceful white city, wan

in the light of the twin moons. When he turned to face Ranson again, his eyes were bleak as a lunar plain.

"One thing," he said slowly. "The music"

"Music?" Ranson echoed. "Look here, Mr. Haller, you . . ."

"It's all right." Jared Haller grinned crookedly. "I'm not insane. Yet. Look, Mr. Ranson! There's just one clue to these mysterious deaths! And that's the music! In each instance the servants told of hearing, very faintly, a strange melody. Music that did queer things to them, even though they could hear it only vaguely. Music like none they'd ever heard. Like the devil's pipes, playing on their souls, while . . . Almighty God!"

Jared Haller froze, his face gray as lead, his eyes blue horror. Ranson was like a man in a trance, bent forward, lips pressed tight until they resembled a livid scar. The room was silent as a tomb; outside, they could hear the vague rumbling of the city, with the distant swish of canal boats, the staccato roar of rockets as some earth-bound freighter leaped from the spaceport. Familiar, homey sounds, these, but beneath them, like an undercurrent of madness, ran the macabre melody.

THERE was, there had never been, Ranson knew, any music like this. It was the pipes of Pan, the chant of robots, the crying of souls in torment. It was a cloudy purple haze that engulfed the mind, it was a silver knife plucking a cruel obligato on taut nerves, it was a thin dark snake writhing its endless coils into the room.

Neither man moved. Ranson knew all the tricks of visual hypnotism, the whirling mirror, the waving hands, the pool of ink . . . but this was the hypnotism of sound. Louder and clearer the music sounded, in eerie overtones, quavering sobbing minors, fierce reverberating bass. Sharp shards of sound pierced their ears, deep throbbing underrhythm shook them as a cat shakes a mouse.

"God!" Haller snarled. "What . . . what is it?"

"Don't know." Ranson felt a queer irritation growing within him. He strode stiffly to the window, peered out. In the darkness, the broad Han canal lay placid;

the stars caught in its jet meshes gently drifted toward the bank, shattered on the white marble. Along the embankment were great fragrant clumps of *fayeh* bushes. It was among these, he decided, that their unknown serenader lay concealed.

Suddenly the elfin melody changed. Fierce, harsh, it rose, until Ranson felt as though a file were rasping his nerves. He knew that he should dash down, seize the invisible musician below . . . but logic, facts and duty, all were fading from his mind. The music was a spur, goading him to wild unreasoning anger. The red mists of hate swirled through his brain, a strange unreasoning bloodlust grew with the savage beat of the wild music. Berserk rage sounded in each shivering note and Ranson felt an insane desire to run amok. To inflict pain, to see red blood flow, to kill . . . kill! Blindly he whirled, groping for his gun, as the music rose in a frenzied death-wail.

Turning, Ranson found himself face to face with Jared Haller. But the tall flinty magnate was now another person. Primitive, atavistic rage distorted his features, insane murder lurked in his eyes. The music was his master, and it was driving him to frenzy. "Kill!" the weird rhythm screamed, "Kill!" And Jared Haller obeyed. He snatched the flame-gun from his pocket, levelled it at Ranson.

Whether it was the deadly melody outside, or the instinct of self-preservation, Ranson never knew, but he dove at Haller with grim fury. The flame-gun hissed, filling the room with a greenish glare, its beam passing so close to Ranson's hair as to singe it. Ranson came up, grinning furiously, and in a moment both men were struggling, teeth bared in animalistic grins, breath coming in choked gasps, whirling in a mad dance of death as the macabre music distilled deadly poison within their brains.

The end came with startling suddenness. Ranson, twisting his opponent's arm back, felt the searing blast of the flame-gun past his hand. Jared Haller, a ghastly blackened corpse, toppled to the floor.

At that moment the lethal rhythm outside changed abruptly. From the fierce maddening beat of a few minutes before, the chords took on a yearning seductive tone. A call, it seemed, irresistible, soft,

with a thousand promises. This was the song the sirens sang to Ulysses, the call of the Pied Piper, the chant of the hours in paradise. It conjured up pictures in Ranson's mind . . . pictures of fairyland, of exquisitely beautiful scenes, of women lovely beyond imagination. All of man's hopes, man's dreams, were in that music, and it drew Ranson as a moth is drawn to a flame. The piping of Pan, the fragile fantasies of childhood, the voices of those beyond life. . . . Ranson walked stiffly toward the source of the music, like a man dragged.

As he approached the window the melody grew louder. The hypnotism of sound, he knew, but he didn't care. It was enthralling, irresistible. Like a sleepwalker he climbed to the sill, stood outlined in the tall window. Twenty feet to the ground, almost certain death . . . but Ranson was lost in the golden world that the elfin melody conjured up. He straightened his shoulders, was about to step out.

Then suddenly there was a roar of atonic motors, a flashing of lights. A police boat, flinging up clouds of spray, swept up the canal, stopped. Ranson shook himself, like a man awakening from a nightmare, saw uniformed figures leaping to the bank. From the shadow of the *fayeh* bushes a slight form sprang, dodged along the embankment. Flame guns cut the gloom but the slight figure swung to the left, disappeared among the twisting narrow streets. Bathed in cold sweat, Ranson stepped back into the room, where the still, terrible form of Jared Haller lay. Ranson stared at it, as though seeing it for the first time. Outside, there were pounding feet; the canal-patrolmen raced through the house, toward the study. And then, his brain weary as if it had been cudgelled; Ranson slid limply to the floor.

HHEADQUARTERS of the Martian Canal-Patrol was brilliantly lighted by a dozen big *astralux* arcs. Captain Maxwell chewed at his gray mustache, staring curiously at Ranson.

"Then you admit killing Haller?" he demanded.

"Yes." Ranson nodded sombrely. "In the struggle. Self-defense. But even if it hadn't been self-defense, I probably would have fought with him. That music was

madness, I tell you! Madness! Nobody's responsible when under its influence! I . . ."

"You killed Haller," Captain Maxwell said. "And you blame it on this alleged music. I might believe you, Ranson, but how many other people would? Even members of Terrestrial Intelligence aren't sacro sanct. I'll have to hold you for trial."

"Hold me for trial?" Ranson leaned forward, his gaunt face intent. "While the real killer, the person playing that music, gets away? Look! Let me out of here for twelve hours! That's all I ask! And if I don't track down whoever was outside Haller's house, you can . . ."

"Sorry." Captain Maxwell shook his head. "You know I'd like to, Ranson. But this is murder. To let a confessed murderer, even though he is a T. I. man, go free, is impossible." The captain drew a deep breath, motioned to the two gray-uniformed patrolmen. "Take Mr. Ranson."

And then Steve Ranson went into action. In one blinding burst of speed, he lunged across the desk, tore Captain Maxwell's pistol from its holster. Before the captain and the two patrolmen knew what had happened, they were staring into the ugly muzzle of the flame-gun.

"Sorry," Ranson said tightly. "But it had to be done. There's hell loose on Mars, the devil's melody! And it's got to be stopped before it turns this planet upside down!"

"You can't get away with this, Ranson!" Captain Maxwell shook his head. "It'll only make it tougher for you when we nab you again! Be sensible! Put down that gun."

"No good. Got to work fast." Ranson backed toward the door, gun in hand. "Let this mad music go unchecked and it's death to all terrestrials on Mars! And I'm going to stop it! So long, captain! You can try me for murder if you want, after I've done my job here!"

Ranson took the key from the massive plastic door as he backed through the entrance. Once in the hall, he slammed the door shut, locked Maxwell and his men in the room. Then, dropping the gun into his pocket, he ran swiftly down the corridor to the main entrance of headquarters.

In the hall a patrolman glanced at him suspiciously, halted him, but a wave of Ranson's T. I. card put the man aside.

Free of headquarters, Ranson began to run. Only a few moments, he knew, before Maxwell and his men blasted a way to freedom, set out in pursuit. Like a lean gray shadow Ranson ran, twisting, dodging, among the narrow streets, heading toward Haller's house. Mercis was a dream city in the wan light of the moons. One in either side of the heavens, they threw weird double shadows across the rippling canals, the aimless streets. Sleek canal-cabs roared along the dark waterways, throwing up clouds of spray, and on the embankments, green-eyed, bulge-headed little reddies padded, silent, inscrutable, themselves a part of the eternal mystery of Mars.

Haller's house stood dark and brooding beside the canal. Captain Maxwell's men had completed their examination and the place was deserted. Ranson stepped into the shadow of the clump of fragrant *fayeh* bushes, where the unknown musician had stood; there was little danger, he felt, of patrolmen hunting for him at Haller's house. The captain had little faith in copybook maxims about the murderer returning to the scene of the crime.

Ranson stood motionless for a moment as a canal boat swept by, then drew from his pocket a heavy black tube. He tugged, and it extended telescopically to a cane some four feet long. The cane was hollow, a tube, and the head of it was large as a man's two fists and covered with small dials, gauges. This was the T. I.'s most cherished secret, the famous "electric bloodhound," by which criminals could be tracked.

Ranson touched a lever and a tiny electric motor in the head of the cane hummed, drawing air up along the tube. He tapped the bank where the unknown musician had stood, eyes on the gauges. Molecules of matter, left by the mysterious serenader, were sucked up the tube, registered on a sensitive plate, just as delicate color shades register on the plate of a color camera.

Ranson tapped the cane carefully upon the ground, avoiding those places where he had stood. Few people crossed this overgrown embankment, and it was a safe bet that no one other than the strange

musician had been there recently. The scent was a clear one, and the dials on the head of the cane read R-2340-B, the numerical classification of the tiny bits of matter left behind by the unknown. The theory behind it was quite simple. The T. I. scientists had reasoned that the sense of smell is merely the effect of suspended molecules in the air acting upon sensitive nerve filaments, and they knew that any normal human can follow a trail of some strong odor such as perfumes, or gasoline, while animals, possessing more sensitive perceptions, can follow less distinct trails. To duplicate this mechanically had proven more difficult than an electric eye or artificial hearing device, but in the end they had triumphed. Their efforts had resulted in the machine Ranson now carried.

The trial was, at the start, clear. Ranson tapped the long tube on the ground like a blind man, eyes on the dial. Along the embankment, into a side street, he made his way. There were few abroad in this old quarter of the city; from the spaceport came the roar of freighters, the rumble of machinery, but here in the narrow winding streets there was only the faint murmur of voices behind latticed windows, the rustle of the wind, the rattle of sand from the red desert beyond the city.

AS Ranson plunged further into the old Martian quarter, the trail grew more and more confused, crossed by scores of other trails left by passersby. He was forced to stop, cast about like a bloodhound, tapping every square foot of the street before the R-2340-B on the dial showed that he had once more picked up the faint elusive scent.

Deeper and deeper Ranson plunged into the dark slums of Mercis. Smoky gambling dens, dives full of drunken spacehands and slim red-skinned girls, maudlin singing . . . even the yellow glare of the forbidden san-rays, as they filtered through drawn windows. Unsteady figures made their way along the streets. Mighty-thewed Jovian blasters, languid Venusians, boisterous earthmen . . . and the little Martians padding softly along, wrapped in their loose dust-robos.

At the end of an alley where the purple shadows lay like stagnant pools, Ranson

paused. The alley was a cul-de-sac, which meant that the person he was trailing must have entered one of the houses. Very softly he tapped the long tube on the ground. Again with a hesitant swinging of dials, R-2340-B showed up, on the low step in front of one of the dilapidated, dome-shaped houses. Ranson's eyes narrowed. So the person who had played the mad murder melody had entered that house! Might still be there! Quickly he telescoped the "electric bloodhound," dropped it into his pocket, and drew his flame-gun.

The old house was dark, with an air of morbid deadly calm about it. Ranson tried the door, found it locked. A quick spurt from his flame-gun melted the lock; he glanced about to make sure no one had observed the greenish glare, then stepped inside.

The hallway was shadowy, its walls hung with ancient Martian tapestries which, from their stilted symbolic ideographs must have dated back to the days of the Canal-Builders. At the end of the hallway, however, light jetted through a half-open door. Ranson moved toward it, silent as a phantom, muscles tense. Gripping his flame-gun, he pushed the door wide . . . and a sudden exclamation broke from his lips.

Before him lay a gleaming laboratory, lined with vials of strange liquids, shining test-tubes, and queer apparatus. Beside a table, pouring a black fluid from a beaker into a test-tube, stood a man. Half-terrestrial, half-Martian, he seemed, with the large hairless head of the red planet, and the clean features of an earthman. His eyes, behind their glasses, were like green ice, and the hand pouring the black fluid did not so much as waver at Ranson's entrance.

Ranson gasped. The bizarre figure was that of Dr. Elath Taen, master-scientist, sought by the T. I. for years, in vain! Elath Taen, outlaw and renegade, whose sole desire was the extermination of all terrestrials on Mars, a revival of the ancient glories of the red planet. The tales told about him were fabulous; and this was the man behind the unholy music!

"Good evening, Mr. Ranson," Elath Taen smiled. "Had I known T. I. men were on Mars I should have taken in-

finitely more precautions. However . . ."

As he spoke, his hand moved suddenly, as though to hurl the test tube at Ranson. Quick as he was, the T. I. man was quicker. A spurt of flame leapt from his gun, shattering the tube. The dark liquid hissed, smoking, on to the floor.

"Well done, Mr. Ranson." Elath Taen nodded calmly. "Had the acid struck you, it would have rendered you blind."

"That's about enough of your tricks!" Ranson grated. "Come along, Dr. Taen! We're going to headquarters!"

"Since you insist." Elath Taen removed his chemist's smock, began, very deliberately, to strip off his rubber gloves.

"Quit stalling!" Ranson snapped. "Get going! I . . ." The words faded on the T. I. man's lips. Faintly, in the distance, came the strains of soft eerie music!

"Good God!" Ranson's eyes darted about the laboratory. "That . . . that's the same as Haller and I . . ."

"Exactly, Mr. Ranson." Elath Taen smiled thinly. "Listen!"

The music was a caress, soft as a woman's skin. Slow, drowsy, like the hum of bees on a hot summer's afternoon. Soothing, soporific, in dreamy, crooning chords. A lullaby, that seemed to hang lead weights upon the eyelids. Audible hypnotism, as potent as some drug. Clearer with each second, the melody grew, coming nearer and nearer the laboratory.

"Come . . . come on," Ranson said thickly. "Got to get out of here."

But his words held no force, and Elath Taen was nodding sleepily under the influence of the weird dream-music. Ranson knew he should act, swiftly, while he could; but the movement of a single muscle seemed an intolerable effort. His skin felt as though it were being rubbed with velvet, a strange purring sensation filled his brain. He tried to think, to move, but his will seemed in a padded vise. The music was dragging him down, down, into the gray mists of oblivion.

Across the laboratory Elath Taen had slumped to the floor, a vague smile of triumph on his face. Ranson turned to the direction of the music, tried to raise his gun, but the weapon slipped from his fingers, he fell to his knees. Sleep . . . that was all that mattered . . . sleep. The music was like chloroform, its notes

stroked his brain. Through half-shut eyes he saw a door at the rear of the laboratory open, saw a slim, dark, exotic girl step through into the room. Slung about her neck in the manner of an accordian, was a square box, with keys studding its top. For a long moment Ranson stared at the dark, enigmatic girl, watched her hands dance over the keys to produce the soft lulling music. About her head, he noticed, was a queer copper helmet, of a type he had never before seen. And then the girl, Elath Taen, the laboratory, all faded into a kaleidoscopic whirl. Ranson felt himself falling down into the gray mists, and consciousness disappeared.

STEVE RANSON awoke to find himself still in the laboratory, bound securely hand and foot. Opposite him Elath Taen was just struggling to his feet, aided by the dark-haired, feline girl.

"I . . . I'm all right, Zeila," Taen muttered. "It was necessary that I, also, hear the sleep-melody, in order to overcome our snooping friend here. But look—he's coming to!"

The girl's gold-flecked eyes turned to Ranson, studied him impassively. Elath Taen gave a mocking smile.

"My daughter Zeila, Mr. Ranson," he murmured. "The consolation of my declining years. She, too, has devoted her life to the great cause of Martian freedom, the overthrow of Terra!"

"To be expected from your daughter," Ranson grunted. "I might have known you were at the bottom of this, Taen! Killing off the officials of the Martian Broadcasting Company!"

"Killing?" Taen smiled, glanced at the queer box slung about the girl's neck. "We only serenaded them. Induce the necessary moods for murder, suicide, madness. You have played our tunes to the remaining two, Zeila?"

The girl nodded impassively. "Cartwright unfortunately ended his own life," she said. "Rankin heard the song of hate, went berserk and was killed. Yla-tu, one of our own people, is in charge of M.B.C. until more terrestrial executives arrive from earth."

"By which time we will have played our melodies to all Mars," Taen murmured. "One swift, merciless uprising, and the

red planet is free! An hour or so over M.B.C.'s network. . . ."

"You're nuts!" Ranson laughed. "If you thing. . . ."

"I don't think," Elath Taen smiled. "I know, Mr. Ranson. Before the night is out, all terrestrials on Mars will be imprisoned or dead. Our people need only something to awaken them, to arouse their hate! And I can do that! I am the master of moods!" He took a copper helmet similar to the one the girl wore, from a shelf, placed it on his head. "A shield against super-sonics," he explained. "It produces vibrations which nullify those set up by the *sonovox*." He faced the languorous Zeila. "Play, child! Convince Mr. Ranson of our powers!"

Again the girl's fingers danced over the keys in a wild melody of hate. Red mists rose before Ranson's eyes and he fought against the bonds that held him. Then the song changed to a dirge-like melody and Ranson fell into the black abyss of despair. This was more than music, he knew; it was something deeper than played upon the soul. Again the notes changed and crawling fear enveloped Ranson until he felt sick with horror of the unknown. Emotion after emotion gripped him, and had he not been helpless, bound, he would have obeyed the moods that swept his brain. He was himself like an instrument upon which a thousand tunes were played . . . and through it all Elath Taen smiled with a vague detached air, while the girl's eyes burned into his own.

Suddenly Elath Taen raised his hand. "Enough, Zeila," he said. "He is exhausted."

The music ceased and Ranson fell back weakly, worn by the storm of emotions that had surged in waves over him.

"You. . . . You win!" he gasped. "What kind of devilry is this?"

"Devilry?" Dr. Taen laughed. "But it is so simple. Music, even normal music, can produce moods. The uplift of the ancient earthsong, 'Marsailles,' the melancholy of the 'Valse Triste,' the passion of the 'Bolero.' Indeed, many years ago on Terra, there was a strange song entitled, 'Gloomy Sunday,' which caused numerous suicides on the part of those who heard it. As for the instrument, it's merely an electrical sound producer such

as your electric organ, theremins, and so on. But to it I have added a full range of supersonic notes, which, though inaudible, are the real mood-changers."

"Supersonics?" Ranson exclaimed. "You mean they're what created the emotions inside me just now?"

"Exactly." Elath Taen nodded. The audible music helps, but it is the supersonics that determine the emotions! Their effect is upon the brain, and nothing can shut them out except counter-notes such as are set up by our helmets!" He tapped the copper dome that encased his head. "The effects of supersonics upon the emotions is interesting, Mr. Ranson. I first got my idea from old twentieth-century records on Terra itself. I read how, in the days of motion pictures before television was perfected, one of your Hollywood companies introduced a supersonic note onto the sound-track of a film in hopes of creating an atmosphere of horror at a certain point in the picture. But so great was the terror induced at the private showing that the supersonic note was immediately cut from the sound-track, and the records of the case filed away. It was the discovery and study of these records that started me on the trail of super-music. Thus with cosmic irony, Mr. Ranson, Earth has created the weapon which will destroy her! Supersonics!"

Ranson stared at Elath Taen, bewildered. Supersonics creating emotions! That was what had infuriated Haller and himself, had driven the other officials of M.B.C. to various forms of death! And now, with M.B.C. in the hands of Taen's followers, they planned to arouse the silent little reddies of Mars to revolt!

"But why?" Ranson demanded. "Earthmen have brought new life, new progress to Mars! We've built roads, canals, spaceports, taught your people our science. . . ."

"You are aliens!" Elath Taen cried. "You must be wiped out!" He drew a whistle from his pocket, blew a shrill blast. There was a pattering of feet, and a squat Martian, his arms scarred by flame-gun burns, entered the room.

"Place the terrestrial in safe keeping," Elath Taen commanded. "Watch him well." He glanced at the blinking red light of a time-signal on the wall. "Come Zeila! It's time to go!"

The girl nodded, picked up the *sonovox*. At the door she paused, glanced back at Ranson.

"Music for the men of Mars," she murmured. "When we return our own people will rule this planet!" Her eyes, brooding on the earthman, were inscrutable. "*Alotah*, Stephen Ranson!"

Then she and her father had left the laboratory, and the burly guard was forcing Ranson toward a small iron-barred door at the rear of the room. Bound, helpless, he staggered into the cell, heard the door clang shut behind him. The scarred, ugly guard stationed himself across the laboratory, where he could keep an eye on the cell.

RANSON lay there in the shadows, suddenly bitter. A nice mess he'd made of things! Wanted for murder by Captain Maxwell, tricked by Elath Taen and his daughter when he had them in his grasp, and now a prisoner here, while they sent their musical madness, their deadly supersonic notes, over the planet-wide chain of M.B.C. Ranson knew what that would mean. Except for the Foreign Legion, a few rocket-plane squadrons, Mars was undefended. If Elath Taen's supersonics aroused the reddies to revolt, his dream of making himself emperor of Mars would be at last fulfilled.

Ranson shot a glance at his guard. The scarred little Martian was leaning back in his chair, eyes on the cell door. But it seemed unlikely that he could see what went on within the shadowy cell. In one swift movement the T. I. man smashed his wrist-watch against the wall, then, picking up a sliver of glass with his fingertips, began to saw at his bonds.

At length the ropes fell from Ranson's aching arms. Swiftly he freed his legs. The guard was still sitting in the well-lighted laboratory, unmoved. Ranson glanced at the door. Steel bars, impossible to penetrate. And seconds ticking away!

A dark fighting grin spread over Ranson's lean face. There was one chance. A wild, desperate chance, but if it worked. . . . Hastily he slipped off his shoes, placed them on the floor beside him. Then, thrusting his hand into his coat pocket, he bulged the cloth out with his finger to simulate a gun.

"Don't move!" he said in sibilant Martian. "Drop your flamgun! Try anything and I'll shoot!"

The guard sprang to his feet, his bulging hairless head gleaming in the bright light, his green eyes cold with rage. As Ranson had expected, he gave no indication of surrender. Instead, he raised his weapon, fired.

At the moment that the guard pressed the trigger, the terrestrial leaped to one side, seeking cover of the wall at the side of the door. A savage greenish flash spat from the gun, a terrible wave of heat swept the cell. Half-blinded, sick from the searing heat, Ranson lay in his corner and watched the door. Under the fiery blast, the iron bars turned white, ran, until only pools of molten metal lay between him and freedom.

The squat Martian snapped off the ray, approached the glowing door cautiously, to find out if there was life in Ranson's inert body. There was . . . more than the little reddy had bargained for. The earthman's arm swung in an arc and one of his shoes, flying through the blasted, melted door, caught the little Martian's wrist, knocked the flame-gun from his hand. The other shoe, following swiftly, landed alongside his head, sent him reeling and staggering back into a shelf of test-tubes and beakers.

"And that's how we do it on Earth!" Grinning tightly, Ranson leaped the puddles of molten metal, plunged through the blasted, glowing remains of the door. Before the ugly little guard could recover, a hard knotted terrestrial fist had slammed against his chin, sent him, limp and unconscious to the floor.

Swiftly Ranson ripped wires from the masses of intricate machinery, bound the inert reddy, then, snatching up the flamgun, ran from the house.

Twisting, turning, he came to the embankment of the Psidian canal. A sleek water-cab slid into view, its atomic motors humming. Ranson hailed it, hand on his gun, but the wizened reddy at the wheel had apparently not heard of Elath Taen's mad melody.

"Martian Broadcasting Building," Ranson grated. "Step on it!"

The driver nodded, and, when his passenger was aboard, sent the boat surging

along the canal, throwing up clouds of spray. Racing, roaring, dodging heavily-laden freight boats, the cab tore over the dark cold water that flowed, via the intricate networks of canals, from the polar caps.

AS they neared the center of the city, the atmosphere of tension grew. Little bands of terrestrial police patrolled the embankments, a squadron of rocket-planes droned above the towering metropolis, the light of their exhausts throwing weird shadows. Occasional shouts, the green flash of flame-guns, issued from the darkness and the crowds of reddies gathered before their radios in houses, shops, and public squares, were seething with excitement. The roar of the cab's motors drowned out the sound of the music and Elath Taen's exultant voice, but the driver moved uneasily.

"Looks like somethin's up," he muttered. "I'll see if we can get a bulletin."

Before Ranson could stop him, he had snapped on the radio within the cab. The wild, frenzied music filled the small cabin, tearing at both men's minds, while Taen's voice urged revolt. Then, under the influence of the supersonics, red flames of hatred leaped through their brains, banishing all thought, logic. The little Martian driver whirled about, only to have the butt of Ranson's gun crash down upon his head. Slumping forward, his body fell against the radio, shattering its fragile tubes. Ranson shook himself as the infernal music abruptly ceased.

The M.B.C. Building lay just before them. Ranson swung the cab to the embankment, sprang out. The tall plastoid building towered white and spectral above the canal. Ranson burst through the door.

Several reddies on guard sprang forward, but a blast from the terrestrial's gun cleared the great hall. He sprang into an elevator, jabbed at a button, and the car shot upward.

The elevator stopped at the top floor, where the broadcasting studios were located. Ranson hurtled along the corridor, plunged through the door. Before him lay a large room, blocked at one end by a thick, double-paned glass. And on the other side of the glass stood Elath Taen, crouched before a television set, his fin-

gers running over the keys of the *sonovox*, his face exultant as he poured out the supersonics of his song of hate. Musical madness for the men of Mars, making them forget all that Terra had done for the red planet, driving them to insane mass murder! And as he played upon the *sonovox*, Taen spoke into the microphone, urging them to revolt! Already they were starting their reign of terror; when he reached his climax they would pour from their houses to kill all who had terrestrial blood. Unless . . .

Ranson leaped forward. Even the supersonics were kept from the outer room by the vacuum-insulated double glass panes; Elath Taen was like a silent marionette in the broadcasting booth, his green eyes flickering with apprehension, his head encased by the shielding copper helmet.

"Drop your gun, Mr. Ranson!" Zeila's voice came from behind him.

Ranson whirled; the girl had been standing behind the door, unnoticed, as he burst into the room. Her exotic face was pale, but the flame gun in her hand was steady. Ranson obeyed, smiling.

"As you wish," he said. "But T. I. has one trick we use as a last resort. Look!" From his pocket he drew a flat metal case. "Supposedly cigarettes, but really the most powerful explosive devised by our laboratories. Shoot me with that flame gun and the heat sets it off. You, your charming father, and I, will all be blown to atoms. So you won't dare shoot!"

Zeila stared at him, lips a crimson slash across her face.

"You won't get away with it!" she exclaimed. "It's bluff!"

"Shoot, then," Ranson said. "Blow the whole top of this building to bits!" He reached out for her gun.

The girl's eyes were fixed on the metal case, and there was fear in them. Ranson took another step toward her. Elath Taen could not watch since he was forced to keep his eyes on the intricate keyboard of the *sonovox*.

"Blown to bits," Ranson repeated sardonically. "Me, too, but at least I'll have removed the leaders of the revolt. This explosive is the last resort of T. I. men. Squeeze that trigger and the heat will set it off! Now give me that gun!"

Zeila Taen broke suddenly, shuddering

at the thought of her vivid beauty torn to shreds by an explosion.

"Take it!" she snarled. "It's too late, anyhow! Mars is in revolt! No one can stop them now! Fool! My father will be emperor after the insurrection! You might have been prince."

RANSON didn't wait to hear more. One blast of the heat gun and the glass partition shattered to a thousand fragments.

"No good, Mr. Ranson." Elath Taen lifted his hands from the keyboard, smiling thinly. "The flame is lit and cannot be put out! The red flame of revolt! Already my people are fighting! Loudspeakers in every public square have carried the sound of mad, blind fury! I am the mood-master!"

"Get back to that sound-box!" Ranson grated. "Play those sleep-producing notes! Play, or I'll blast your lovely daughter here to a cinder! You claim you're the mood-master! Well, if your damned supersonics started this, they can end it!" He swung his gun to cover Zeila's sleek figure. "Play, Dr. Taen! I've never killed a woman yet, but it's her life or those of all terrestrials on Mars! Back to your *sonovox*!"

For a long moment Elath Taen stared at his daughter, then nodded his hairless head somberly.

"Again you win, Mr. Ranson," he said softly. "I should have killed you or won you to my side, long ago." Turning to the *sonovox*, he began to play.

Ranson stood tense, covering the girl with his gun. Soft, lulling music, supersonic notes that seemed to caress his brain, filled the room. The drowsy sound of rain on a roof, of rustling leaves, of a soothing night wind . . . all these were bound up in the melody. Peace, rest, sleep . . . every nerve seemed to relax, every muscle seemed limp, as the dreamy musical hypnosis took effect.

Elath Taen and the girl were watching him covertly. There was a thin smile on the doctor's dark saturnine face. Dully Ranson tried to reason out why Elath Taen should be smiling, but somehow his mind refused to function. Those cloudy mists rising before his eyes! Miles away Taen was speaking, above the soporific sounds.

"Too bad," he was saying. "You forgot that whatever these supersonics may do to my people, they also affect you. Zeila and I are protected from the short-wave emanations by our helmets. But you, Mr. Ranson, are not! Already you are helpless and in a moment you will sleep, as you did in our laboratory! Then, with you secure, I shall arouse my people once more!"

Ranson tried to move, tried to act, but the music was a silken noose binding him, and he had no will power left. Sleep . . . nothing else mattered . . . As in a dream he saw Zeila coming toward him, felt himself crumple to the floor. Vaguely he remembered bright flashes, shouts, and then all was grey oblivion.

"Ranson! Ranson!" The words beat like fists upon his drugged brain.

The T. I. man stirred restlessly; out of the whirling mists Captain Maxwell's face became a stern reality.

"What happened?" the police officer was saying. "First the reddies go kill-crazy, then start passing out! Almost went nutty ourselves, down at headquarters, listening! But then the murder-music stopped and we heard your voice, talking to Elath Taen! So we came here pronto. Just in time."

"Taen! And Zeila!" Ranson gasped. "Where are they?"

"Gone." Captain Maxwell motioned to a door at the rear of the room. "Ducked out and down the elevator. Blasted the cables when they hit the bottom so we weren't able to follow." He shook his head. "You were right about that music! No wonder you and Haller went berserk! Don't worry about any trial for murder! Mars has been mad, this night!"

Ranson struggled to his feet. Taen and his daughter escaped! With the secret of the supersonic notes! But it would be a long time before they dared return to Mars. Still groggy, Ranson drew the metal cigarette case from his pocket.

"How were you able to force your way in here?" Captain Maxwell demanded. "To make them change the tune and break up the revolt?"

Ranson opened the metal case.

"Bluff," he said, taking a cigarette from the container and lighting it. "That's what saved Mars! Just . . . bluff!"

Grinning, he blew a cloud of smoke.

THE LAST MARTIAN

By RAYMOND VAN HOUTEN

The great pumps of Mars were slowly stopping. Unless the strange being from far-off Gamtl could renew their life-giving flow, a once-mighty planet would die.

Illustrated by Morey



P EETN drew his cloak more firmly about his furry shoulders as the sun began to sink through the Martian sky and the wind throbbed a deeper note in the gathering darkness. He stood gazing silently as the fading light painted the sky in somber colors, preparing to disappear for another night of screaming

wind and penetrating sub-zero cold.

He watched until the twilight deepened to purple and then stalked laboriously into the wind, up the gentle slope toward the little hollow where he went each night.

His tall, articulated form strode across the dusty plain. By the time he had reached the foot of the bank the sky was totally blank, except for the stars, and he could barely propel himself forward against the raging world-wide currents of atmosphere. The last few yards he crawled on his bellyplates. He tumbled into the central hollow and lay exhausted, his lungs sucking in and out—.

The cry of a Martian *odlat* would not be audible to human ears, but the screech which emanated within an inch of Peetn's ear-cupulas sent paralyzing waves of terror washing to the tip of his spiny tail. He skirled in agony as inch-long teeth crunched savagely into his shoulder, and the *odlat*, startled, let go. Peetn's tentacles shot beneath the flapping folds of his cloak and the night-dark was shattered in a hissing blaze of light. The headless corpse of the *odlat* thudded to the ground. Black reaction smote Peetn a blow somewhere inside, and the Martian lost consciousness.

It was after midnight that he awoke to the agonizing throb of his poisoned shoulder. His faculties returned somewhat, and he crawled painfully over to a little niche in the rocks, where he kept his scant stores. Extracting a few pieces of twisted root which had a slight medicinal quality, he plugged the holes left by the *odlat's* fangs. Soon, under the soporific influence of the whining wind, he dropped off into a feverish, agitated sleep.

The Martian awoke just before noon of the next day and found that the crude poultices he had applied to his wounds had been more effective than he had expected. The shoulder still hurt, but with the gentle ache of healing tissues rather than the savage bite of newly-torn nerves. The effect of the *odlat* poison had worn off, and outside of a slight weakness and dizziness, Peetn felt nothing amiss in his interior. He slowly unwound from where he lay and stretched to his full height.

The body of the *odlat* lay where it had fallen the night before, headless and beginning to stiffen. The dominant race of

Mars could use little of this altogether useless and dangerous beast, namely the ears and eyeballs, and if the animal were not too old, the tail. This fierce old reprobate was entirely worthless therefore, and Peetn dragged it out into the desert and threw it into a pit. It could not be left lying near his hollow to draw other *odlats* to the spot.

He returned from his errand and prepared for another day at his appointed duties.

The routine of caring for a Martian water-station is neither complicated nor arduous, being hardly more than a daily inspection tour. No Martian alive understood the methods or mechanisms which drew and pumped water from the massive ice-cap into the pool of the colony; no one could alter the flow of liquid through the pipes, or shut it off, for the valves had long ago corroded into their seats. Even the inspection was a mere gesture.

PEETN always started his rounds in the underground pump room, partly because most of the machinery was there, but mostly because of a subconscious certainty that there something was wrong. Somehow the conglomeration of squacks, hisses, and shudders suggested things that shouldn't be. Day after day he had gone over the maze of pipes and cylinders, looking for a dreaded break, but always he found everything the way he had left it the night before. He couldn't know of oilless bearings burning slowly out during the centuries. The Martian artificers had built for incredible durability in that long-gone age of Martian glory, but they had not anticipated the mining of the last drop of oil or the last flake of graphite, which had occurred millennium before Peetn's time.

Once again he began to go over the machinery which he didn't vaguely understand. In the center of the floor squatted a huge, inscrutable mass of metal from which plumed the beginning of all the pipes. Peetn traced with his sight organs the spidery lengths of hard, grey tubing to where they disappeared into the housings of the chugging pumps. It was the pumps which emitted the disturbing noises most of all. Peetn stuck his head close and listened to the discords in their tune.

It sounded like rasping, like two raw bones being rubbed together under the flesh. He shook his bald head sadly and let his tentacle-tips flicker lightly over the smooth metal. As long as they didn't stop—

He watched the four bulky pipes crawl along the floor and up the wall, where they pushed through the ceiling into the valve-house above. He glanced over the gauges, meaningless to him, but still faithfully recording the surge of water passing through the pipes. It had lessened by about four-fifths since this station had been in operation, but nobody noticed the difference. Those that had seen the greater flow were less than dust these ages past.

He trudged back up the stairs counting them mechanically, and was in the outer air again. The change from semi-darkness to light brought his multiple eyelids winking shut, screening his sight. He squinted toward the southern horizon, seeing nothing but wastes.

What was that?

From the tail of his eye he thought he saw a flash of light far out toward the west, but although he gazed at the spot for several minutes, it did not repeat. Dismissing it as a result of the glare, he stopped and entered the valve-house, which stood in the shadow of the tower-ing reservoir.

He finished his useless routine, touching gently the same things and looking in the same places as every day, and came outside.

This time it was unmistakable. Something flashed in the sunlight out in the desert to the west, a piece of polished metal or glass. Or a weapon. Somebody was on the desert!

He was immediately prompted to run atop the knoll, whistle and wave his tentacles so that they would not miss him, but some primal caution held him back until reason took hold of his chaotic mind.

Out there was either a friend or an enemy. If it were a friend, it could only be his relief, and he wasn't due for another three years. Besides, he would be coming from the south. Therefore it was an enemy, some members of another colony coming to raid the water station!

Bending low, he raced up the hill and

threw himself into the central hollow, facing west. He drew from its holster the flash gun, which had killed the *odlat*, and cradled it beside him. His eyes strained on their stalks across the western wastes, ready for the first hint of suspicious movement.

Intra-mural war had again broken out on Mars! It disturbed Peetn to have the first responsibility fall on him, but recollecting the tales that the oldsters used to tell him, he was a little proud too. The little band of water-station defenders had been heroes in those days of the past, not useless, forgotten automatons. There had been a real and vital reason for their bitter existence in the north. Peetn's presence, up till now, had been a formality.

For a long time he lay sweeping the desert before him, waiting for another glimpse of his attackers, until suddenly he realized that another night was near. The sky had already begun to edge toward the dark end of the spectrum, and the light was lessening visibly. Peetn grew uneasy as the shadow of the box-like reservoir left its source and began a sinister march to the horizon behind him. The rising nightwind send cold *odlat*-tongues up and down his spindly back, and although he knew that no living thing could stand on the open desert during a Martian night, the coming of darkness brought fear rather than a sense of security.

THE dusky sun touched the western plains and the wind howled higher in anticipation of the darkness. Abruptly, from out of the dull glare in the west, a figure, small from distance, moved. Peetn's limbs and tentacles tensed as he watched, and amazement riveted his gaze.

That small, chunky, ballooning figure was no Martian!

Carried onward by the wind, staggering weakly on its thick legs, the figure came on, weaving from side to side, blundering over the bare rock and hard-packed sand.

Peetn made no move to lift the projector as the thing came within range. Possibly the sight of this apparition had driven all thought of it from his mind; or possibly his analytical subconscious had reasoned that all the menace of the unknown attacker had vanished, since this

was obviously no raiding Martians from another colony.

Whatever it was, it seemed in no way belligerent. In fact, Peetn guessed that the creature was in trouble, possibly dying. It made no effort to hold back against the driving wind, as he would have done, and the erratic course which it followed bespoke numbed faculties.

The strange figure passed Peetn's hill-crest hollow a few rods to the north and brought up with a thud against the sheer side of the reservoir, where it toppled limply over and lay still on the ground. Banks of sand began to accumulate against the windward sides of the bloated legs and body.

Peetn hesitated only long enough to jam the flash pistol back into its holster, where it would be safe from the blasting sand, before he scuttled, bent double, toward the mysterious intruder's prone body. The thought that it was a corpse flashed through the Martian's mind, but the chance that a living being lay in travail decided him in favor of the risk.

He was down on his tentacles and knees when he reached the reservoir wall, and he burrowed down behind the inert form for a moment before attempting the more arduous trip back with the dead weight dragging behind. He found to his surprise that it was covered by a case of metal!

Inch by inch, minute by minute, he conquered the two-score feet back to the small safety of his hilltop. Keeping the limp form between himself and the wind, he strained against the uphill drag until finally he topped the crest and slid down into the familiar haven. Dizzy from exertion and gulping air and sand indiscriminately, he relaxed on the fringes of oblivion while the Martian wind bawled in Jovian defeat.

Returning vigor brought renewed interest in his prize of war, and he raised himself on his bony knees, peering breathlessly into the transparent faceplate of the metal suit. Nausea, fear, and amazement flooded his brain at the sight of the alien face which returned his stare with sightless, open eyes. It was the face of a Martian nightmare; square, with jutting chin-bone; straight long nose, pierced under the lobes by wide slits; hideous blue eyes with single

skin-like lids; and a mouth—a long, gaping crack rimmed with soft red flesh and filled with gleaming teeth, like a carnivorous beast's!

And that mouth breathed! It was not dead!

Peetn's tentacles fumbled with the unfamiliar drawcatch of the creature's locked faceplate, until with a grating of sand crystals between metal, it slid out, and he lifted the glass off. A puff of evil-smelling vapor flew into the Martian's face, and he recoiled.

The awful face beneath writhed, and a low groan from the pulpy lips made Peetn's eye-sacs pale in terror. He watched fascinated as the returning light of consciousness slowly dissolved the glaze over the bluish eyes. One metal-clad hand raised feebly to the open face-plate and then dropped like lead as if the owner had used the last bit of energy in his storm-beaten body for the effort. The monstrosity lay panting for breath and making murmuring sounds. Peetn bent closer to listen, submerging his revulsion with curiosity.

"Water! Water!" it was saying over and over.

A wave of deep compassion engulfed Peetn's twin hearts as he looked into that twisted face beneath its mat of stiff bristly black fur. He realized instantly that this thing was suffering, probably from lack of the things which kept it alive. He closed the faceplate again to keep out the whirling sand and rummaged out the last of his *merrl* root and a small quantity of water, on the chance that his food might be suitable to the alien tastes of this being.

An avid light sparkled in the cloudy eyes as Peetn held the food and water close, and in a spasmodic burst of energy it grasped the metal container and splashed the precious fluid into its sucking mouth. Peetn averted his eye-stalks from the horrible, yet pitiful sight. The *merrl* root was snatched from his tentacle and crammed between the red lips with revolting smacking sounds and gasps of pleasure.

Strength seemed to flow back into the stranger, and he assayed to sit up. He slumped into Peetn's supporting tentacles with a weak grin and closed his eyes,

dropping immediately into a deep sleep.

Peetn lay the inert figure back on the ground and gazed fascinated at the face, now relaxed in repose. From whence had this stranger come? Mars could never have spawned such a creature! This was a being from another world, maybe from *Gamt!* itself! Peetn thrilled at the thought as he lay himself down to a food-and-water-less bed.

LONG, long ago the savants had predicted the death of Mars, the gradual wasting away of its ability to support life, until finally the last Martian would die alone. They pointed with eagerness and envy in their telescopes at the soft green sphere of the third planet, picturing it as the Martian Eden, teeming with life-giving food and water.

Space ships were built. There was not nearly enough room for the entire population of Mars abroad, so it was agreed that they should act as ferries, shuttling back and forth until Mars was evacuated.

The first contingent departed one day on the long trek to another world, and the people left behind waited with renewed hope for their turn to go. Hope turned to uneasiness as a second fleet of ships rocketed toward Paradise, many years after the first ones should have returned. A third and fourth fleet followed at ever-lengthening intervals, and with ever-lessening numbers, but all vanished into obscurity with the same finality.

Weakening civilization soon could no longer strain the necessary resources from the perishing planet to send another fleet; *Gamt!*, the lush, life-choked pleasure-laden Paradise, became a myth of the past, and then even the myth became dim and half-remembered.

Life was a sodden series of hungry days and frigid nights. The energies of each individual were strictly circumscribed to activities designed to give his colony one more day, one more hour of life. Birth, when it was allowed at all, was limited to the replacement of necessary personnel to carry on the food gathering of the community. All contact, outside of occasional meetings between scouts searching for new patches of *merri* bushes, was lost between the colonies, which had settled

on the dust-covered sites of the ancient cities because of the trickle of water which still issued from the massive pipes. Even the sporadic raids made on the water stations were abandoned, and as the danger of attack lessened, small and smaller numbers of guards were spared from the duties of procuring *merri* from the desert wastes, until finally only one made the food-and-water-less trip into the northern steppes of the polar region. Every fifth year another was sent to relieve him, but the oldest man in the colony could not remember when one had returned. What privation, what utter loneliness these martyrs endured would never be known. What acts of heroism they might perform would go forever unsung.

Peetn had been very young when he had set out for the far north and five years of Martian hell at the water station, but the two years that had passed so far had left him a dead-hearted, middle-aged Martian. Wrinkles had appeared on his eyesacs, and his fur had become sparse and gray. His mind, too, had turned gray, had withered from watching too many sunsets. He came to feel inside that he would never see his colony again, just like the others.

IN spite of his activity the day before, Peetn was up and about early the next morning and went into the desert for *merri*. Before he left, however, he placed the metal container half-full of water beside the still-sleeping figure in the metal suit. An intermittent buzzing sound issuing from its mouth startled him, and he opened the faceplate. The sonorous sound stopped abruptly with a snort, and the stranger mumbled a few words and squirmed in his sleep. Peetn hastily but softly closed the lid and ambled off into the sea of rock and sand.

When he returned, his visitor was standing shakily on his feet, watching him stilt across the plain toward him. Peetn emptied his pockets of the succulent *merri* he had gathered and faced the stranger with a whistle of greeting, extending a friendly tentacle. It was grasped by the prehensile tip of the creature's queer tentacle and gently oscillated up and down. Peetn interpreted the gesture as meaning friendship and enthusiastically entered into the spirit of it, pumping the thick arm up

and down until the being cried out. The Martian, noticing that his companion's eyes were fastened on the *merri* root which he had brought, snatched up one of the tubers and offered it to him.

They broke their fast in genial camaraderie, this decadent Martian and his un-Martian visitor, so utterly divergent in form, so different in many ways. But such is the yearning of loneliness and bewilderment that all this was forgotten.

Peetn was about to leave on his daily inspection when a gentle hand restrained him. The stranger was making sounds at him, meaningless and unfamiliar, but it was apparent that he wanted Peetn to stay and listen. So the Martian stayed and listened solemnly, strange thoughts milling through his head.

"I know you're not going to understand a word of this," his companion was saying, "But I'm going to tell it to you, anyway—just for luck. My name is Harrison Clark, late of San Francisco, U. S. A., Earth. I cracked up, like a damn fool, in the first rocket to reach Mars about two hundred miles out there in the desert. My food and water gave out, and the air inside my ship was getting bad, so I crawled into my can and started out, looking for God knows what! I was about done when you must have found me, for I don't remember anything for a long time back. You saved my life, and now I want to do something for you. Got any lawns you want mowed, or houses I can haunt? I'll bet I'm quite a fright in these parts!" He grinned broadly.

Peetn listened gravely to this address, and when it was over, he extended a tentacle and shook hands.

"I get it, pal!" laughed Harry Clark. "We're friends no matter what I look like. You'd be a sixteen cylinder haunt back on Earth yourself!"

Peetn disengaged his tentacle-tip and strode off down the slope to the subterranean entrance of the pump room. Clark hesitated a moment and then followed, more slowly because of his wasted strength, Peetn turned and waited for him at the head of the steps, and they entered the cavern together.

Clark could not see for a few minutes in the gloom, and he stood still, while

Peetn, with his more adaptable sight organs, moved about with ease in the familiar surroundings. The multiple noises which rebounded in the enclosed space beat through the Earthman's open faceplate, betraying the secret of the darkly looming masses.

"Machinery," he said softly.

Peetn went through his customary routine, conscious of the stranger's eyes watching his every move, and conscious also of a pitying wonder in them. They quit the underground room, Peetn gently tugging Clark away from the four gauges which measured the water-flow through the monster pipes, and entered the valve-house.

Peetn's tentacles caressed the valve-wheels and giant housings reverently—and uselessly—while the stranger once again watched with interest. Peetn was suddenly startled by a gusty, explosive sound from the alien.

"What a hell of a mechanic you are!" laughed the Earthman. "I don't believe you know the first thing about all this, and yet you're obviously the caretaker around here. The pumps down there are in a bad way. Why don't you oil them?"

Peetn stuck out his tentacle and they shook hands.

"Yeah, we're pals, but I still think you're a bust. Look," he walked over to one of the valve wheels and grasped it by the rim, "there's hardly a trickle going through the pipes. Why don't you open her up, like this—" The valve creaked protestingly and moved a fraction of an inch under the Earthman's effort. Gauges on the wall quivered slightly and advanced an imperceptible amount along their calibrated scales.

Peetn went suddenly berserk. He lashed out with his tentacles and caught Harrison Clark's straining figure about the waist, flinging him across the narrow room with a metallic clangor. He stood over the cowering figure, his tentacles poised threateningly. This creature was meddling with the machinery!

"Hey, wait a minute!" shouted the shaken Earthman, raising himself on an elbow and looking up into the inscrutable face of the Martian. "I'm not trying to hurt anything! Sorry if I've done anything wrong. Here, shake hands!"

He extended his hand and reluctantly the Martian took it.

They went back to the little hollow, Clark limping a bit from his fall. Peetn enclosed himself in a shell of reticence after the episode in the valve-house, and it was only by dint of hard labor that the Earthman was able to coax him out of it.

THE days went by, and sandwiched between them were the Martian nights with their savage fury. Slowly the two mis-matched companions evolved a crude method of making themselves understood to each other, and a dawning comprehension of the incredible state of Martian life came to Harry Clark. He spent much time in wandering about the water station, and slowly he pieced together the puzzle. He knew that it was water which was contained in the pipes almost the first day he had been there. The intake pipes burrowed under the ground toward the north direction of the ice cap, while the outlets stretched away to the south to an unknown destination. This, then, must be some kind of intermediary, where the ice of the polar cap was transformed into water and then pumped south to some place where it was needed. Examination of the huge machine in the center of the pump cavern convinced him that this must be where the ice was turned into water. How the ice was transported over the five hundred miles from the polar cap he could not discover. Water came out, however, so ice must go in.

The pumps carried the water up into the high-sided reservoir, from where it started its journey south after passing through the main valves.

But something was missing. Where did the trickle of water go? Why was it so small? Why had the Martian gone off the deep end when he had tried to increase the volume of water flowing through the pipes? He made up his mind to worm the answers out of Peetn at the first opportunity.

Peetn's mind was in a turmoil as he grubbed in the desert sands at the base of the stubby, tree-like plant. He mechanically pulled up the bulbous roots, tearing them loose, but always leaving enough of a stem so that a new one would grow back on, but his thoughts were upon what

the stranger had made known to him by the diagram he had drawn in the sand. This being was from Gamtl! Gamtl, the mythical Eden, the planet to which legend told all good Martians would go some day. Some day, it was said, the ghostly ships of space would return, and all Mars would be happy again. This monstrosity claimed to have come from there. Could this be the time of resurrection which Mars was promised by the old myth? How could this thick-tentacled, hideous-faced being bring Mars back to its old lost glory?

Such were Peetn's thoughts as he approached the water station with his pockets half full of *merri*. The now familiar figure of the being from Gamtl stood atop the knoll beckoning to him.

They shook hands solemnly after Peetn had dumped his load of food, and the stranger drew Peetn over to a patch of cleared sand. Bending down, he drew with his finger a crude diagram of the water-station, pointing to it, and then to the reservoir, pump-cavern, and the valve-house, indicating each in the sand in turn. He then drew a line from the pump-cavern northward, and connected it to a large scrawl which Peetn decided was supposed to represent the ice-cap. He nodded his head in a gesture which he had learned from the Earthman, indicating that he understood, and that the diagram was right.

Clark then drew a line from the valve-house south. By means of much pointing and insistent signs, the Martian finally discovered that he wished to know where it led, and what was at the end.

Peetn jack-knifed his gangly legs and sank to his knees. The tip of his tentacles traced a picture in the sand. It looked like a series of small circles interlinked by little curved lines. Peetn pointed to himself, then at the circles. Then he made eighty-two little dashes in the sand.

The Earthman understood immediately. So that was it! This water-station supplied a colony of eighty-two Martians with drinking water, vital to their existence! They must live very far south near the equator, in the warmest zone of the planet, where food and heat were more abundant. Of course! And Beany was shipped up here as watchman. Clark looked with

new respect at the Martian, thinking of the soul-deadening loneliness he must have known. He certainly wasn't much good as a mechanic; why, he couldn't even have known that the flow of water could be increased by opening those valves wider! Naturally, he had thought that Clark had tried to sabotage the plant when he had laid hands on the machinery. Those pumps—it was a wonder that they hadn't frozen stiff long before this.

Harrison Clark made up his mind.

Next morning when Peetn arose, the man from Gamtl was gone. So was a three-day supply of *merrl* and water.

IT was eight days later when the Martian emerged from the valve-house and saw the tiny figure come trudging out of the west. It was the alien, and behind him dragged a curious object, a black, cylinder-like affair trundling along on four wheels and pulled by a rope in the stranger's hands. Peetn stalked out to meet him and after they had shaken hands, he curled a few tentacles about the rope and together they pulled the mysterious object into the water-station. Peetn watched with his curiosity aroused as Clark heaved and grunted the thing down the thirty-one steps into the underground pump room, talking all the while.

"You know what this is, Beany, old boy?" he said. "It's oil—for the pumps. It'll take the squeaks out of 'em for a while anyway. It won't last forever, but before it's gone, maybe you and I can figure out something else. Lucky I had this barrel left on the ship. There!" He stood up and dusted off his hands. "If we can get those pumps to stop chattering, we can open up the valves and let a *real* head of water through to your pals. Be afraid to do it with the things in this condition."

He unscrewed the cap and peered in, sniffing. He turned to the Martian with a broad grin.

"About three-quarters full," he announced, marking the level on the outside of the drum with his hand.

Peetn, deciding that the mystery had progressed just about far enough for his Martian tastes, stilted over and inserted his tube-like proboscis into the hole left by the screw cap, and inhaled. He straight-

ened up abruptly and whistled, tears dropping from his yellow, sac-like eyes.

Clark laughed excitedly. "That's oil, you Beanpole! We're going to rebuild Mars with that drum! You poor guys must have had a hell of a time living in this hole," he continued, becoming serious and pensive and indicating the desert with a wave of his hand. "It would take one of you a life-time to find food enough to live that long. Your civilization has sunk right down to rock bottom, but I think we're going to change all that." He shook his head doubtfully. "It's according to how long we can make this oil last. Those machines which your ancestors made are the real McCoy, all right, but God knows how long they've been pounding away dry as a bone. The oil might pour out of every crack as fast as we pour it in. Well," he finished, shrugging his shoulders. "there's only one way of finding out!"

Carefully, lest he spill a drop of the priceless fluid, he filled a water container with the lubricant.

"Keep your tentacles crossed!" he shot at Peetn, who looked down upon him from his superior height as the Earthman slowly poured the contents of his container into the oil-cup on the main bearing of No. 1 pump. He allowed the dregs to drain into the capacious pocket and then bent with hands on knees, looking for signs of a leak below.

Peetn followed his every move tensely, wondering whether or not to force a halt to this tampering with the vital machines, but somehow he trusted this monster from Gamtl. He seemed to know what he was about, and there *was* a chance that after he was through the disturbing noises in the machines would be gone. So he watched and waited, always on the alert to prevent any outright damage. He couldn't see, anyway, how pouring some of that evil-smelling stuff into those little cups would change anything.

And then suddenly, the song of the pumps changed! The thumping and creaking lessened to an almost imperceptible amount as a tiny ring of oil appeared around the periphery of the bearing. The pump rose to a new level of activity, the parts whirling and plunging at a greater speed. Peetn thrilled in surprise.

His interest increased ten-fold as Clark

filled the cups on the other three pumps in turn. Each one's voice dropped from a shout to a whisper, and all chugged with more vigor under the relaxing influence of the lubricating oil. Peetn trembled all over as he noted that the protesting groans which had worried him so were gone. This was unbelievable! This stranger from Gamtl was indeed a friend!

"Our work isn't done, Beany," said Clark, as he dumped what was left of the oil back into the drum and wiped his hands in the sand. "The really important part is yet to come. This is just preparing; now we've got to knock those rusty valves loose from their eye-teeth!"

He screwed the barrel-cap back into place and, followed by Peetn whose animation was visibly increased over his usual legarthic, fatalistic state, he trod the stairs into the open air.

The Earthman gave a preliminary tug or two at the valve-wheels, and then muttered under his breath. Peetn scowled inwardly. It was not good, tampering with the machines. Then the Martian went all weak and fluttery inside as the stranger picked up a short metal bar which had been lying in a dusty corner and began banging on the tops of the machines! He was upon Clark like a flash, and the tendons in the Earthman's arms cracked agonizingly as the Martian giant wrested the bar away from him in mid-blow. Clark relaxed as the tense tableau threatened to continue for a protracted length of time.

"Look, Beany," he said pleadingly. "I'm only trying to jar the rust loose inside. Gimme back that thing and let me alone. I know what I'm doing."

The Martian, of course, didn't understand a word, and he stood toying with the length of metal rod, his yellow eyes blank and inscrutable. Then with a sudden gesture, he handed it back to Clark and extended a tentacle.

"He trusts me!" gasped the Earthman as he pumped the furry limb up and down enthusiastically.

Using the bar as a lever, he twisted the spoked wheel around several turns, watching the meters on the wall as the valve grated wider and wider. The indicator crept up and up, revealing the increased flow to Clark's anxious eyes. The noise from the pumps below drifting through

the open archway thundered with new energy to catch up with the added drain on their powers. Trembling with triumph, he disentangled the bar from the spokes and turned the handle on the petcock from which Peetn drained their drinking water every morning. A stout stream as thick as his thumb spattered to the ground with a heavenly gurgling sound. Peetn's knees must have given way at the sight, for he folded up and sat down on the floor ungently, his eyes glued to that stream of life which issued from the pipette.

SEVERAL weeks later, Harry Clark stood by with an amused grin on his face as Peetn tweedled excitedly to the three Martians who had come stilting out of the south the evening before. The whistling of the Martians was less than gibberish to him, but he got the idea from the various tentacle-wavings and yellow-eyed stares in his direction that Peetn was giving them the dirt about himself.

And that was exactly what Peetn was doing.

"The monster is from Gamtl, the Paradise of the old legend," he was whistling. "Many days ago the wind blew him into the water-station, sick and dying from lack of life essentials. He was clad in the strange metal suit which you still see upon him. He is a very strange and alien being. It seems inexplicable, but I believe that he understands more about them than we for whom they exist. Well, one day in the valvehouse, he laid tentacles on one of the machines, and I had to pull him bodily away from it. His interest did not carry him quite so far as that in succeeding days, but about a week later I arose in the morning to find him gone!"

"His return, which I didn't expect, was the queerest sight I ever saw. He came across the desert at about midday, from the direction he first came, dragging behind him a cylindrical object which I later found to be hollow and filled with a very amazing liquid. He took this container down into the cavern of the chugging machines and unscrewed a small circular section in the top. I smelled its contents; it smelled like the juice of the *merri* plant when it was crushed, a very unpleasant odor, I assure you. It also had the same consistency and texture, as

I discovered surreptitiously afterwards.

"Well, he poured some of it into the chugging machines, and the noises which they had been making—stopped! It was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced. He seemed to wield some un-Martian control over them!

"Then he did a thing which makes me shudder to recount! He picked up a bar of metal half as long as my tentacle and began belaboring the machines from which I had pulled him a few weeks before! Quickly I stopped him, but something, perhaps the memory of how he had quieted the chugging machines, told me that this being could be trusted, and that he knew what he was doing. I—I took an awful chance. I squirm inside when I think of what might have happened if my trust in this Gamtlan had been misplaced. I gave him back the bar and allowed him to continue!

"He stopped banging before he broke anything, and then he did a peculiar thing. He turned the outer edge of the round machines in there," Peetn indicated the valve-house, "so that the whole top moved around itself. Then the miracle happened."

"Yes, go on," twittered the other one excitedly. "What did he do?"

Peetn paused for a moment to gather weight, and then proceeded solemnly. "He opened the little machine from which I draw my drinking water, and a stream shot forth as thick as my tentacle and splattered all about the room!" He allowed himself to exaggerate. "An unbelievable quantity of water poured out in the short space of time that I watched it."

The newcomers seemed slightly disappointed at the tale Peetn told, expecting to hear about gigantic super-Martian operations by the stranger from Gamtl, the Martian spirit-world.

"Why that's just about what happened down at the colony, about the water, I mean," said one of them. "All of a sudden a flood came gushing out of the supply pipe and overflowed the pool and spreading out over the surrounding desert. A funny thing, too, was the way that the *merri* plants grew where the water

had spread. When we left, our colony had a full fifteen days' stock, and all of it was gathered within a five-minute walk of the caves!"

Peetn had a faraway look in his usually inexpressive, yellow eyes. A quiver was noticeable in his whistle as he replied.

"Can this be the fulfilment of the old legend of Gamtl?" he asked. "Already we owe this alien much; our lives have been made easier to live. Who knows, with the awful burden of food-gathering and water-conserving lifted from our colony, we may be able to gain back some of the lost glory of our ancestors; may again be able to build water-stations and flash-guns! Yes, my friends, the day that stranger staggered into this water-station was the first day of the rebirth of Mars!"

* * *

Harrison Clark, for the first time since he had crashed on the Martian desert in the rocket, did not dream so longingly of Earth as he lay in the little hollow he had come to know as home. He had work to do here. A feeling of mingled exultation and determination had possessed him when Peetn had shown him the liquid which resulted from crushing *merri*. It was a very heavy and durable vegetable oil, quite capable of continuing the job of lubricating the machinery after his petroleum was gone. Mars could be re-awakened with it; the task was his.

Then, too, some day another rocket might arrive from Earth, one that wouldn't crash. The American Rocket Society wouldn't give up because their first rocket failed to return. In examining the pumps a day or so ago, he thought he found what made them go. A small, ridiculously small box, no larger than his two fists fastened to the eccentric. Obviously atomic power, or something as efficient and ever-lasting. Earth could use something like that.

A sense of warmth and friendship suffused him, in spite of the frigid wind which blew all around, as he thought of the Martian monsters which lay sleeping beside him. They were *his* people now! For when Peetn had stopped whistling to them, one by one they had filed past, and every damn one had shaken his hand!

CHILD OF THE SUN

By LEIGH BRACKETT

**Far beyond molten Mereury flashed the Patrol-pursued Falcon.
... Out to where black Vulcan whirled his hidden orbit, and a
flame-auraed last child of Sol played his cosmic game.**

ERIC FALKEN stood utterly still, staring down at his leashed and helpless hands on the controls of the spaceship *Falcon*.

The red lights on his indicator panel showed Hiltonist ships in a three-dimensional half-moon, above, behind, and below him. Pincer jaws, closing fast.



Illustration by A. Leyden/frost.



The animal instinct of escape prodded him, but he couldn't obey. He had fuel enough for one last burst of speed. But there was no way through that ring of ships. Tractor-beams, criss-crossing between them, would net the *Falcon* like a fish.

There was no way out ahead, either. Mercury was there, harsh and bitter in the naked blaze of the sun. The ships of Gantry Hilton, President of the Federation of Worlds, inventor of the Psycho-Adjuster, and ruler of men's souls, were herding him down to a landing at the lonely Spaceguard outpost.

A landing he couldn't dodge. And then. . . .

For Paul Avery, a choice of death or Happiness. For himself and Sheila Moore, there was no choice. It was death.

The red lights blurred before Falken's eyes. The throb of the plates under his feet faded into distance. He'd stood at the controls for four chronometer days, ever since the Hiltonists had chased him up from Losangles, back on Earth.

He knew it was because he was exhausted that he couldn't think, or stop the nightmare of the past days from tramping through his brain, hammering the incessant question at him. *How?*

How had the Hiltonists traced him back from New York? Paul Avery, the Unregenerate recruit he went to get, had passed a rigid psycho-search—which, incidentally, revealed the finest brain ever to come to the Unregenerate cause. He couldn't be a spy. And he'd spoken to no one but Falken.

Yet they were traced. Hiltonist Black Guards were busy now, destroying the last avenues of escape from Earth, avenues that he, Falken, had led them through.

But how? He knew he hadn't given himself away. For thirty years he'd been spiriting Unregenerates away from Gantry Hilton's strongholds of Peace and Happiness. He was too old a hand for blunders.

Yet, somehow, the Black Guards caught up with them at Losangles, where the *Falcon* lay hidden. And, somehow, they got away, with a starving green-eyed girl named Kitty. . . .

"Not Kitty," Falken muttered. "Kitty's Happy. Hilton took Kitty, thirty years ago. On our wedding day."

A starving waif named Sheila Moore, who begged him for help, because he was Eric Falken and almost a god to the Unregenerates. They got away in the *Falcon*, but the Hiltonist ships followed.

Driven, hopeless flight, desperate effort to shake pursuit before he was too close to the Sun. Time and again, using precious fuel and accelerations that tried even his tough body, Falken thought he had escaped.

But they found him again. It was uncanny, the way they found him.

Now he couldn't run any more. At least he'd led the Hiltonists away from the pitiful starving holes where his people hid, on the outer planets and barren asteroids and dark derelict hulks floating far outside the traveled lanes.

And he'd kill himself before the Hiltonist psycho-search could pick his brain of information about the Unregenerates. Kill himself, if he could wake up.

He began to laugh, a drunken, ragged chuckle. He couldn't stop laughing. He clung to the panel edge and laughed until the tears ran down his scarred, dark face.

"Stop it," said Sheila Moore. "Stop it, Falken!"

"Can't. It's funny. We live in hell for thirty years, we Unregenerates, fighting Hiltonism. We're licked, now. We were before we started.

"Now I'm going to die so they can suffer hell a few weeks more. It's so damned funny!"

SLEEP dragged at him. Sleep, urgent and powerful. So powerful that it seemed like an outside force gripping his mind. His hands relaxed on the panel edge.

"Falken," said Sheila Moore. "Eric Falken!"

Some steely thing in her voice lashed him erect again. She crouched on the shelf bunk against the wall, her feral green eyes blazing, her thin body taut in its torn green silk.

"You've got to get away, Falken. You've got to escape."

He had stopped laughing. "Why?" he asked dully.

"We need you, Falken. You're a legend, a hope we cling to. If you give up, what are we to go on?"

She rose and paced the narrow deck. Paul Avery watched her from the bunk on the opposite wall, his amber eyes dull with the deep weariness that slackened his broad young body.

Falken watched her, too. The terrible urge for sleep hammered at him, bowed his grey-shot, savage head, drew the strength from his lean muscles. But he watched Sheila Moore.

That was why he had risked his life, and Avery's, and broken Unregenerate law to save her, unknown and untested. She blazed, somehow. She stabbed his brain with the same cold fire he had felt after Kitty was taken from him.

"You've got to escape," she said. "We can't give up, yet."

Her voice was distant, her raw-gold hair a detached haze of light. Darkness crept on Falken's brain.

"How?" he whispered.

"I don't know . . . Falken!" She caught him with thin painful fingers. "They're driving you down on Mercury. Why not trick them? Why not go—beyond?"

He stared at her. Even he would never have thought of that. Beyond the orbit of Mercury there was only death.

Avery leaped to his feet. For a startled instant Falken's brain cleared, and he saw the trapped, wild terror in Avery's face.

"We'd die," said Avery hoarsely. "The heat. . . ."

Sheila faced him. "We'll die anyway, unless you want Psycho-Change. Why not try it, Eric? Their instruments won't work close to the Sun. They may even be afraid to follow."

The wiry, febrile force of her beat at them. "Try, Eric. We have nothing to lose."

Paul Avery stared from one to the other of them and then to the red lights that were ships. Abruptly he sank down on the edge of his bunk and dropped his broad, fair head in his hands. Falken saw the cords like drawn harp-strings on the backs of them.

"I . . . can't," whispered Falken. The command to sleep was once more a vast shout in his brain. "I can't think."

"You must!" said Sheila. "If you sleep, we'll be taken. You won't be able to kill yourself. They'll pick your brain empty. Then they'll Hiltonize you with the Psycho-Adjuster."

"They'll blank your brain with electric impulses and then transmit a whole new memory-pattern, even shifting the thought-circuits so that you won't think the same way. They'll change your metabolism, your glandular balance, your pigmentation, your face, and your fingerprints."

He knew she was recounting these things deliberately, to force him to fight. But still the weak darkness shrouded him.

"Even your name will be gone," she said. "You'll be placid and lifeless, lazying your life away, just one of Hilton's cattle." She took a deep breath and added, "Like Kitty."

He caught her shoulders, then, grinding the thin bone of them. "How did you know?"

"That night, when you saw me, you said her name. Perhaps I made you think of her. I know how it feels, Eric. They took the boy I loved away from me."

He clung to her, the blue distant fire in his eyes taking life from the hot, green blaze of hers. There was iron in her. He could feel the spark and clash of it against his mind.

"Talk to me," he whispered. "Keep me awake. I'll try."

Waves of sleep clutched Falken with physical hands. But he turned to the control panel.

The bitter blaze of Mercury stabbed his bloodshot eyes. Red lights hemmed him in. He couldn't think. And then Sheila Moore began to talk. Standing behind him, her thin vital hands on his shoulders, telling him the story of Hiltonism.

"Gantry Hilton's Psycho-Adjuster was a good thing at first. Through the mapping and artificial blanking of brain-waves and the use of electro-hypnotism—the transmission of thought-patterns directly to the brain—it cured non-lesional insanity, neuroses, and criminal tendencies. Then, at the end of the Interplanetary War. . . ."

Red lights closing in. How could he get past the Spaceguard battery? Sheila's voice fought back the darkness. Speed,

that was what he needed. And more guts than he'd ever had to use in his life before. And luck.

"Keep talking, Sheila. Keep me awake."

"... Hilton boomed his discovery. The people were worn out with six years of struggle. They wanted Hiltonism, Peace and Happiness. The passion for escape from life drove them like lunatics."

He found the emergency lever and thrust it down. The last ounce of hoarded power slammed into the rocket tubes. The *Falcon* reared and staggered.

Then she shot straight for Mercury, with the thin high scream of tortured metal shivering along the cabin walls.

Spaceshells burst. They shook the *Falcon*, but they were far behind. The ring of red lights was falling away. Acceleration tore at Falken's body, but the web of sleep was loosening. Sheila's voice cried to him, the story of man's slavery.

The naked, hungry peaks of Mercury snarled at Falken. And then the guns of the Spaceguard post woke up.

"Talk, Sheila!" he cried. "Keep talking!"

"So Gantry Hilton made himself a sort of God, regulating the thoughts and emotions of his people. There is no opposition now, except for the Unregenerates, and we have no power. Humanity walks in a placid stupor. It cannot feel dissatisfaction, disloyalty, or the will to grow and change. It cannot fight, even morally.

"Gantry Hilton is a god. His son after him will be a god. And humanity is dying."

There was a strange, almost audible snap in Falken's brain. He felt a quick, terrible stab of hate that startled him because it seemed no part of himself. Then it was gone, and his mind was clear.

He was tired to exhaustion, but he could think, and fight.

Livid, flaming stars leaped and died around him. Racked plates screamed in agony. Falken's lean hands raced across the controls. He knew now what he was going to do.

Down, down, straight into the black,

belching mouths of the guns, gambling that his sudden burst of speed would confuse the gunners, that the tiny speck of his ship hurtling bow-on would be hard to see against the star-flecked depths of space.

Falken's lips were white. Sheila's thin hands were a sharp unnoticed pain on his shoulders. Down, down. . . . The peaks of Mercury almost grazed his hull.

A shell burst searingly, dead ahead. Blinded, dazed, Falken held his ship by sheer instinct. Thundering rockets fought the gravitational pull for a moment. Then he was through, and across.

Across Mercury, in free space, a speeding mote lost against the titanic fires of the Sun.

FALKEN turned. Paul Avery lay still in his bunk, but his golden eyes were wide, staring at Falken. They dropped to Sheila Moore, who had slipped exhausted to the floor, and came back to Falken—and stared and stared with a queer, stark look that Falken couldn't read.

Falken cut the rockets and locked the controls. Heat was already seeping through the hull. He looked through shaded ports at the vast and swollen Sun.

No man in the history of space travel had ventured so close before. He wondered how long they could stand the heat, and whether the hull could screen off the powerful radiations.

His brain, with all its knowledge of the Unregenerate camps, was safe for a time. Knowing the hopelessness of it, he smiled sardonically, wondering if sheer habit had taken the place of reason.

Then Sheila's bright head made him think of Kitty, and he knew that his tired body had betrayed him. He could never give up.

He went down beside Sheila. He took her hands and said:

"Thank you. Thank you, Sheila Moore."

And then, quite peacefully, he was asleep with his head in her lap.

THE heat was a malignant, vampire presence. Eric Falken felt it even before he wakened. He was lying in Avery's bunk, and the sweat that ran

from his body made a sticky pool under him.

Sheila lay across from him, eyes closed, raw-gold hair pushed back from her temples. The torn green silk of her dress clung damply. The starved thinness of her gave her a strange beauty, clear and brittle, like sculptured ice.

She'd lived in alleys and cellars, hiding from the Hiltonists, because she wouldn't be Happy. She was strong, that girl. Like an unwanted cat that simply wouldn't die.

Avery sat in the pilot's chair, watching through the shaded port. He swung around as Falken got up. The exhaustion was gone from his square young face, but his eyes were still veiled and strange. Falken couldn't read them, but he sensed fear.

He asked, "How long have I slept?" Avery shrugged. "The chronometer stopped. A long time, though. Twenty hours, perhaps."

Falken went to the controls. "Better go back now. We'll swing wide of Mercury, and perhaps we can get through." He hoped their constant velocity hadn't carried them too far for their fuel.

Relief surged over Avery's face. "The size of that Sun," he said jerkily. "It's terrifying. I never felt. . ."

He broke off sharply. Something about his tone brought Sheila's eyes wide open.

Suddenly, the bell of the mass-detector began to ring, a wild insistent jangle.

"Meteor!" cried Falken and leaped for the 'visor screen. Then he froze, staring.

It was no meteor, rushing at them out of the vast blaze of the Sun. It was a planet.

A dark planet, black as the infinity behind it, barren and cruel as starvation, touched in its jagged peaks with subtle, phosphorescent fires.

Paul Avery whispered, "Good Lord! A planet, here? But it's impossible!"

Sheila Moore sprang up.

"No! Remember the old legends about Vulcan, the planet between Mercury and the Sun? Nobody believed in it, because they could never find it. But they could never explain Mercury's crazy orbit, either, except by the gravitational interference of another body."

Avery said, "Surely the Mercurian

observatories would have found it?" A pulse began to beat in his strong white throat.

"It's there," snapped Falken impatiently. "And we'll crash it in a minute if we. . . Sheila! Sheila Moore!"

The dull glare from the ports caught the proud, bleak lines of his gypsy face, the sudden fire in his blue eyes.

"This is a world, Sheila! It might be a world for us, a world where Unregenerates could live, and wait!"

She gasped and stared at him, and Paul Avery said:

"Look at it, Falken! No one, nothing could live there."

Falken said softly, "Afraid to land and see?"

Yellow eyes burned into his, confused and wild. Then Avery turned jerkily away.

"No. But you can't land, Falken. Look at it."

Falken looked, using a powerful search-beam, probing. Vulcan was smaller even than Mercury. There was no atmosphere. Peaks like splinters of black glass bristled upward, revolving slowly in the Sun's tremendous blaze.

The beam went down into the bottomless dark of the canyons. There was nothing there, but the glassy rock and the dim glints of light through it.

"All the same," said Falken, "I'm going to land." If there was even a tiny chance, he couldn't let it slip.

Unregeneracy was almost dead in the inhabited worlds. Paul Avery was the only recruit in months. And it was dying in the miserable outer strongholds of independence.

Starvation, plague, cold, and darkness. Insecurity and danger, and the awful lost terror of humans torn from earth and light. Unless they could find a place of safety, with warmth and light and dirt to grow food in, where babies could be born and live, Gantry Hilton would soon have the whole Solar System for his toy.

There were no more protests. Falken set the ship down with infinite skill on a ledge on the night side. Then he turned, feeling the blood beat in his wrists and throat.

"Vac suits," he said. "There are two and a spare."

They got into them, shuffled through the airlock, and stood still, the first humans on an undiscovered world.

LEAD weights in their boots held them so that they could walk. Falken thrust at the rock with a steel-shod alpenstock.

"It's like glass," he said. "Some unfamiliar compound, probably, fused out of raw force in the Solar disturbance that created the planets. That would explain its resistance to heat."

Radio headphones carried Avery's voice back to him clearly, and Falken realized that the stuff of the planet insulated against Solar waves, which would normally have blanketed communication.

"Whatever it is," said Avery, "it sucks up light. That's why it's never been seen. Only little glimmers seep through, too feeble for telescopes even on Mercury to pick up against the Sun. Its mass is too tiny for its transits to be visible, and it doesn't reflect."

"A sort of dark stranger, hiding in space," said Sheila, and shivered. "Look, Eric! Isn't that a cave mouth?"

Falken's heart gave a great leap of hope. There were caves on Pluto. Perhaps, in the hidden heart of this queer world. . . .

They went toward the opening. It was surprisingly warm. Falken guessed that the black rock diffused the Sun's heat instead of stopping it.

Thin ragged spires reared overhead, stabbing at the stars. Furtive glints of light came and went in ebon depths. The cave opened before them, and their torches showed glistening walls dropping sheer away into blackness.

Falken uncoiled a thousand-foot length of synthetic fiber rope from his belt. It was no larger than a spider web, and strong enough to hold Falken and Avery together. He tied one each of their metal boots to it and let it down.

It floated endlessly out, the lead weight dropping slowly in the light gravity. Eight hundred, nine hundred feet. When there were five feet of rope left in Falken's hand it stopped.

"Well," he said. "There *is* a bottom."

Paul Avery caught his arm. "You aren't going down?"

"Why not?" Falken scowled at him, puzzled. "Stay here, if you prefer. Sheila?"

"I'm coming with you."

"All right," whispered Avery. "I'll come." His amber eyes were momentarily those of a lion caught in a pit. Afraid, and dangerous.

Dangerous? Falken shook his head irritably. He drove his alpenstock into a crack and made the rope fast.

"Hang onto it," he said. "We'll float like balloons, but be careful. I'll go first. If there's anything wrong down there, chuck off your other boot and climb up fast."

They went down, floating endlessly on the weighted rope. Little glints of light fled through the night-dark walls. It grew hot. Then Falken struck a jog in the cleft wall and felt himself sliding down a forty-five-degree offset. Abruptly, there was light.

Falken yelled, in sharp, wild warning.

The thing was almost on him. A colossus with burning eyes set on foot-long stalks, with fanged jaws agape and muscles straining.

Falken grabbed for his blaster. The quick motion overbalanced him. Sheila slid down on him and they fell slowly together, staring helplessly at destruction, charging at them through a rainbow swirl of light.

The creature rushed by, in utter silence.

Paul Avery landed, his blaster ready. Falken and Sheila scrambled up, cold with the sweat of terror.

"What was it?" gasped Sheila.

Falken said shakily, "God knows!" He turned to look at their surroundings.

And swept the others back into the shadow of the cleft.

Riders hunted the colossus. Riders of a shape so mad that even in madness no human could have conceived them. Riders on steeds like the arrowing tails of comets, hallooing on behind a pack of nightmare hounds. . . .

Cold sweat drenched him. "How can they live without air?" he whispered. "And why didn't they see us?"

There was no answer. But they were safe, for the moment. The light, a shifting web of prismatic colors, showed nothing moving.

They stood on a floor of the glassy black rock. Above and on both sides walls curved away into the wild light—sunlight, apparently, splintered by the shell of the planet. Ahead there was a ebon plain, curving to match the curve of the vault.

Falken stared at it bitterly. There was no haven here. No life as he knew it could survive in this pit. Yet there was life, of some mad sort. Another time, they might not escape.

"Better go back," he said wearily, and turned to catch the rope.

The cleft was gone.

Smooth and unbroken, the black wall mocked him. Yet he hadn't moved more than two paces. He smothered a swift stab of fear.

"Look for it," he snapped. "It must be here."

But it wasn't. They searched, and came again together, to stare at each other with eyes already a little mad.

Paul Avery laughed sharply. "There's something here," he said. "Something alive."

Falken snarled, "Of course, you fool! Those creatures. . . ."

"No. Something else. Something laughing at us."

"Shut up, Avery," said Sheila. "We can't go to pieces now."

"And we can't just stand here glaring." Falken looked out through the rainbow dazzle. "We may as well explore. Perhaps there's another way out."

Avery chuckled, without mirth. "And perhaps there isn't. Perhaps there was never a way in. What happened to it, Falken?"

"Control yourself," said Falken silkily, "or I'll rip off your oxygen valve. All right. Let's go."

They went a long way across the plain in the airless, unechoing silence, slipping on glassy rock, dazzled by the wheeling colors.

Then Falken saw the castle.

It loomed quite suddenly—a bulk of squat wings with queer, twisted turrets and straggling windows. Falken scowled. He was sure he hadn't seen it before. Perhaps the light. . . .

They hesitated. Icy moth-wings flittered over Falken's skin. He would have

gone around, but black walls seemed to stretch endlessly on either side of the castle.

"We go in," he said, and shuddered at the thought of meeting folk like those who hunted the flaming-eyed colossus.

Blasters ready, they went up flat titanic steps. A hall without doors stretched before them. They went down it.

FALKEN had a dizzy sense of *change*. The walls quivered as though with a wash of water over them. And then there were doors opening out of a round hall.

He opened one. There was a round hall beyond, with further doors. He turned back. The hall down which they had come had vanished. There were only doors. Hundreds of them, of odd shapes and sizes, like things imperfectly remembered.

Paul Avery began to laugh.

Falken struck him, hard, over the helmet. He stopped, and Sheila caught Falken's arm, pointing.

Shadows came, rushing and wheeling like monstrous birds. Cold dread caught Falken's heart. Shadows, hunting them. . . .

He choked down the mad laughter rising in his own throat. He opened another door.

Halls, with doors. The shadows swept after them. Falken hurled the doors open, faster and faster, but there was never anything beyond but another hall, with doors.

His heart was gorged and painful. His clothing was cold on his sweating body. He plunged on and on through black halls and drifting shards of light, with the shadows dancing all around and doors, doors, doors.

Paul Avery made a little empty chuckle. "It's laughing," he mumbled and went down on the black floor. The shadows leaped.

Sheila's eyes were a staring fire in her starved white face. Her terror shocked against Falken's brain and steadied it.

"Take his feet," he said harshly. "Take his feet."

They staggered on with their burden. And presently there were no more doors, and no roof overhead. Only the light

and the glassy walls, and the dancing shadows.

The walls were thin in places. Through them Falken saw the dark colossus with its flaming eyes, straining through the spangled light. After it came the hounds and hunters, not gaining nor falling back, riding in blind absorption.

The walls faded, and the shadows. They were alone in the center of the black plain. Falken looked back at the castle.

There was nothing but the flat and naked rock.

He laid Avery down. He saw Sheila Moore fall beside him. He laughed, one small, mad chuckle. Then he crouched beside the others, his scarred gypsy face a mask of living stone.

Whether it was then, or hours later that he heard the voice, Falken never knew. But it spoke loudly in his mind, that voice. It brought him up, his futile blaster raised.

"You are humans," said the voice. "How wonderful!"

Falken looked upward, sensing a change in the light.

Something floated overhead. A ten-foot area of curdled glory, a core of blinding brilliance set in a lacy froth of fire.

The beauty of it caught Falken's throat. It shimmered with a sparkling opalescence, infinitely lovely—a living, tender flame floating in the rainbow light. It caught his heart, too, with a deep sadness that drifted in dim, faded colors beneath the brilliant veil.

It said, clearly as a spoken voice in his mind:

"Yes. I live, and I speak to you."

Sheila and Avery had risen. They stared, wide-eyed, and Sheila whispered, "What are you?"

The fire-thing coiled within itself. Little snapping flames licked from its edges, and its colors laughed.

"A female, isn't it? Splendid! I shall devise something very special." Colors rippled as its thoughts changed. "You amaze me, humans. I cannot read your minds, beyond thoughts telepathetically directed at me, but I can sense their energy output.

"I had picked the yellow one for the strongest. He appeared to be so. Yet he

failed, and you others fought through."

Avery stared at Falken with the dawn of an appalled realization in his amber eyes. Falken asked of the light:

"What are you?"

The floating fire dipped and swirled. Preening peacock tints rippled through it, to be drowned in fierce, proud scarlet. It said:

"I am a child of the Sun."

IT watched them gape in stunned amazement, and laughed with mocking golden notes.

"I will tell you, humans. It will amuse me to have an audience not of my own creating. Watch!"

A slab of the glassy rock took form before them. Deep in it, a spot of brilliance grew.

It was a Sun, in the first blaze of its virile youth. It strode the path of its galactic orbit alone. Then, from the wheeling depths of space, a second Sun approached.

It was huge, burning with a blue-white radiance. There was a mating, and the nine worlds were born in a rush of supernatural fire.

And there was life. Not on the nine burning planets. But in free space, little globes of fire, bits of the Sun itself shocked somehow to intelligence in the vast explosion of energy.

The picture blurred. The colors of the floating light were dulled and dreamy.

"There were many of us," it sighed. "We were like tiny Suns, living on the conversion of our own atoms. We played, in open space. . . ."

Dim pictures washed the screen, glories beyond human comprehension—a faded vision of splendor, of alien worlds and the great wheeling Suns of outer space. The voice murmured:

"Like Suns, we radiated our energy. We could draw strength from our parent, but not enough. We died. But I was stronger than the rest, and more intelligent. I built myself a shell."

"Built it!" whispered Avery. "But how?"

"All matter is built of raw energy, electron and proton existing in a free state. With a part of my own mass I built this world around myself, to hold

the energy of the Sun and check the radiation of my own vitality.

"I have lived, where my race died. I have watched the planets cool and live and die. I am not immortal. My mass grows less as it drains away through my shell. But it will be a long, long time. I shall watch the Sun die, too."

The voice was silent. The colors were ashes of light. Falken was stricken with a great poignant grief.

Then, presently, the little malicious flames frothed to life again, and the voice said:

"My greatest problem is amusement. Here in this black shell I am forced to devise pleasures from my own imagination."

Falken gasped. "The hunters, the cleft that vanished, and that hellish castle?" He was suddenly cold and hot at once.

"Clever, eh? I created my hunt some eons ago. According to my plan the beast can neither escape nor the hunters catch him. But, owing to the uncertainty factor, there is one chance in some hundreds of billions that one or the other event may occur. It affords me endless amusement."

"And the castle?" said Falken silkily. "That amused you, too."

"Oh, yes! Your emotional reactions. . . . Most interesting!" Falken raised his blaster and fired at the core of the light.

Living fire coiled and writhed. The Sun-child laughed.

"Raw energy only feeds me. What, are there no questions?"

Falken's voice was almost gentle. "Do you think of nothing but amusement?"

Savage colors rippled against the dim, sad mauves. "What else is there, to fill the time?"

Time. Time since little frozen Pluto was incandescent gas.

"You closed the opening we came through," said Avery abruptly.

"Of course."

"But you'll open it again? You'll let us go?"

The tone of his voice betrayed him. Falken knew, and Sheila.

"No," said Sheila throatily. "It won't let us go. It'll keep us up here to play with, until we die."

Ugly dark reds washed the Sun-child. "Death!" it whispered. "My creatures exist until I bid them vanish. But death, true death—that would be a supreme amusement!"

A DESPERATE, helpless rage gripped Falken. The vast empty vault mocked him with his dead hopes. It jeered at him with solid walls that were built and shifted like smoke by the power of this lovely, soulless flame.

Built, and shifted. . . .

Sudden fire struck his brain. He stood rigid, stricken dumb by the sheer magnificence of his idea. He began to tremble, and the wild hope swelled in him until his veins were gorged and aching.

He said, with infinite care, "You can't create real living creatures, can you?"

"No," said the Sun-child. "I can build the chemicals of their bodies, but the vital spark eludes me. My creatures are simply toys activated by the electrical interplay of atoms. They think, in limited ways, and they feel crude emotions, but they do not live in the true sense."

"But you can build other things? Rocks, soil, water, air?"

"Of course. It would take a great deal of my strength, and it would weaken my shell, since I should have to break down part of the rock to its primary particles and rebuild. But even that I could do, without serious loss."

There was silence. The blue distant fires flared in Falken's eyes. He saw the others staring at him. He saw the chances of failure bulk over him like black thunderheads, crowned with madness and death.

But his soul shivered in ecstasy at the thing that was in it.

The Sun-child said silkily, "Why should I do all this?"

"For amusement," whispered Falken. "The most colossal game you have ever had."

Brilliant colors flared. "Tell me, human!"

"I must make a bargain first."

"Why should I bargain? You're mine, to do with as I will."

"Quite. But we couldn't last very long. Why waste your imagination on

the three of us when you might have thousands?"

Avery's amber eyes opened wide. A shocked incredulity slackened Sheila's rigid muscles. The voice cried:

"Thousands of humans to play with?"

The eager greed sickened Falken. Like a child wanting a bright toy—only the toys were human souls.

"Not until the bargain is made," he said.

"Well? What is the bargain? Quick!"

"Let us go, in return for the game which I shall tell you."

"I might lose you, and then have nothing"

"You can trust us," Falken insisted. He was shaking, and his nerves ached. "Listen. There are thousands of my people, living like hunted beasts in the deserts of the Solar System. They need a world, to survive at all. If you'll build them one in the heart of this planet, I'll bring them here.

"You wouldn't kill them. You'd let them live, to admire and praise you for saving them. It would amuse you just to watch them for some time. Then you could take one, once in a while, for a special game.

"I don't want to do this. But it's better that they should live that way than be destroyed."

"And better for you, too, eh?" The Sun-child swirled reflectively. "Breed men like cattle, always have a supply. It's a wonderful idea. . . ."

"Then you'll do it?" Sweat dampened Falken's brow.

"Perhaps. . . . Yes! Tell me, quickly, what you want!"

Falken swung to his stunned and unbelieving companions. He gripped an arm of each, painfully hard.

"Trust me. Trust me, for God's sake!" he whispered. Then, aloud, "Help me to tell it what we need."

There was a little laughing ripple of golden notes in the Sun-child's light, but Falken was watching Sheila's eyes. A flash of understanding crossed them, a glint of savage hope.

"Oxygen," she said. "Nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon dioxide. . . ."

"And soil," said Falken. "Lime, iron, aluminum, silicon. . . ."

THEY came to on a slope of raw, red earth, still wet from the rain. A range of low hills lifted in the distance against a strange black sky. Small tattered clouds drifted close above in the rainbow's light.

Falken got to his feet. As far as he could see there were rolling stretches of naked earth, flecked with brassy pools and little ruddy streams. He opened his helmet and breathed the warm wet air. He let the rich soil trickle through his fingers and thought of the Unregenerates in their frozen burrows.

He smiled, because there were tears in his hard blue eyes.

Sheila gave a little sobbing laugh and cried, "Eric, it's done!" Paul Avery lifted dark golden eyes to the hills, and was silent.

There was a laughing tremble of color in the air where the Sun-child floated. Small wicked flames drowned the sad, soft mauves. The Sun-child said:

"Look, Eric Falken. There, behind you."

Falken turned—and looked into his own face.

It stood there, his own lean body in the worn vac suit, his own gypsy face and the tangle of frosted curls. Only the eyes were different. The chill, distant blue was right, but there were spiteful flecks of gold, a malicious sparkle that was like. . . .

"Yes," purred the Sun-child. "Myself. A tiny particle, to activate the shell. A perfect likeness, no?"

A slow, creeping chill touched Falken's heart. "Why?" he asked.

"Long ago I learned the art of lying from men. I lied about reading minds. Your plan to trick me into building this world and then destroy me was plain on the instant of conception."

Laughing wicked colors coiled and spun.

"Oh, but I'm enjoying this! Not since I built my shell have I had such a game! Can you guess why I made your double?"

Falken's lips were tight with pain, his eyes savage with remorse at his own stupidity.

"It—he will go in my ship to bring my people here."

He knew that the Sun-child had picked

his unwitting brain as cleanly as any Hiltonist psycho-search.

In sudden desperation he drew his blaster and shot at the mocking likeness. Before he tripped the trigger-stud a wall of ebon glass was raised between them. The blast-ray slid away in harmless fire and died, burned out.

The other Falken turned and strode away across the new land. Falken watched him out of sight, not moving nor speaking, because there was nothing to do, nothing to say.

The lovely wicked fire of the Sun-child faded suddenly.

"I am tired," it said. "I shall suckle the Sun, and rest."

It floated away. For all his agony, Falken felt the heart-stab of its sad, dim colors. It faded like a wisp of lonely smoke into the splintered light.

Presently there was a blinding flash and a sharp surge of air as a fissure was opened. Falken saw the creature, far away, pressed to the roof of the vault and pulsing as it drank the raw blaze of the Sun.

"Oh, God," whispered Falken. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

Falken laughed, one harsh wild cry. Then he stood quite still, his hands at his sides, his face a mask cut deep in dark stone.

"Eric," whispered Sheila. "Please. I can't be brave for you all the time."

He was ashamed of himself then. He shook the black despair away with cynical fatalism.

"All right, Sheila. We'll be heroes to the bitter end. You, Avery. Get your great brain working. How can we save our people, and, incidentally, our own skins?"

Avery flinched as though some swift fear had stabbed him. "Don't ask me, Falken. Don't!"

"Why not? What the devil's the matter. . . ." Falken broke off sharply. Something cold and fierce and terrifying came into his face. "Just a minute, Avery," he said gently. "Does that mean you think you know a way?"

"I . . . For God's sake, let me alone!"

"You do know a way," said Falken inexorably. "Why shouldn't I ask you,

Paul Avery? Why shouldn't you try to save your people?"

Golden eyes met his, desperate, defiant, bewildered, and pitiful all at once.

"They're not my people," whispered Avery.

They were caught, then, in a strange silence. Soundless wheeling rainbows brushed the new earth, glimmered in the brassy pools. Far up on the black crystal of the vault the Sun-child pulsed and breathed. And there was stillness, like the morning of creation.

Eric Falken took one slow, taut step, and said, "Who are you?"

The answer whispered across the raw red earth.

"Miner Hilton, the son of Gantry."

FALKEN raised the blaster, forgotten in his hand. Miner Hilton, who had been Paul Avery, looked at it and then at Falken's face, a shield of dark iron over cold, terrible flame.

He shivered, but he didn't move, nor speak.

"You know a way to fight that thing," said Falken, very softly, in his throat. "I want to kill you. But you know a way."

"I—I don't know. I can't . . ." Golden tortured eyes went to Sheila Moore and stayed there, with a dreadful lost intensity.

Falken's white teeth showed. "You want to tell, Miner Hilton. You want to help us, don't you? Because of Sheila!"

Young Hilton's face flamed red, and then went white. Sheila cried sharply,

"Eric, don't! Can't you see he's suffering?"

But Falken remembered Kitty, and the babies who were born and died on freezing rock, without sun or shelter. He said,

"She'd never have you, Hilton. And I'll tell you this. Perhaps I can't force out of you what you know. But if I can't, I swear to God I'll kill you with my own hands."

He threw back his head and laughed suddenly. "Gantry Hilton's son—in love with an Unregenerate!"

"Wait, Eric." Sheila Moore put a hand on his arm to stop him, and went forward. She took Miner Hilton by the shoulders and looked up at him, and said,

"It isn't so impossible, Miner Hilton. Not if what I think is true."

Falken stared at her in stunned amazement, beyond speech or movement. Then his heart was torn with sudden pain, and he knew, with the clarity of utter truth, that he loved Sheila Moore.

She said to Miner Hilton, "Why did you do this? And how?"

Young Hilton's voice was flat and strained. He made a move as though to take her hands from his shoulders, but he didn't. He stared across her red-gold head, at Falken.

"Something had to be done to stamp out the Unregenerates. They're a barrier to complete peace, a constant trouble. Eric Falken is their god, as—*as* Sheila said. If we could trap him, the rest would be easy. We could cure his people.

"My father couldn't do it himself. He's old, and too well-known. He sent me, because mine is the only other brain that could stand what I had to do. My father has trained me well.

"To get me by the psycho-search, my father gave me a temporary brain pattern. After I was accepted as a refugee, I established mental contact with him. . . ."

"Mental contact," breathed Falken. "That was it. That's why you were always so tired, why I couldn't shake pursuit."

"Go on," said Sheila, with a queer gentleness.

Hilton stared into space, without seeing. "I almost had you in Losangles, Falken, but you were too quick for the Guards. Then, when we were trapped at Mercury, I tried to make you sleep. I was leading those ships, too.

"But I was tired, and you fought too well, you and Sheila. After that we were too close to the Sun. My thought waves wouldn't carry back to the ships."

He looked at Falken, and then down at Sheila's thin face.

"I didn't know there were people like you," he whispered. "I didn't know men could feel things, and fight for them like that. In my world, no one wants anything, no one fights, or tries. . . . And I have no strength. I'm afraid."

Sheila's green eyes caught his, compelled them.

"Leave that world," she said. "You

see it's wrong. Help us to make it right again."

In that second, Falken saw what she was doing. He was filled with admiration, and joy that she didn't really care for Hilton—and then doubt, that perhaps she did.

Miner Hilton closed his eyes. He struck her hands suddenly away and stepped back, and his blaster came ready into his hand.

"I can't," he whispered. His lips were white. "My father has taught me. He trusts me. And I believe in him. I must!"

Hilton looked where the glow of the Sun-child pulsed against ebon rock. "The Unregenerates won't trouble us any more."

He raised the muzzle of his blaster to his head.

IT was then that Falken remembered his was empty. He dropped it and sprang. He shocked hard against Hilton's middle, struck him down, clawing for his gun arm. But Hilton was heavy, and strong.

He rolled away and brought his barrel lashing down across Falken's temple. Falken crouched, dazed and bleeding, in the mud.

He laughed, and said, "Why don't you kill me, Hilton?"

Hilton looked from Falken's uncowed, snarling face to Sheila. The blaster slipped suddenly from his fingers. He covered his face with his hands and was silent, shivering.

Falken said, with curious gentleness, "That proves it. You've got to have faith in a thing, to kill or die for it."

Hilton whispered, "Sheila!" She smiled and kissed him, and Falken looked steadfastly away, wiping the blood out of his eyes.

Hilton grasped suddenly at the helmet of his vac-suit. He talked, rapidly, as he worked.

"The Sun-child creates with the force of its mind. It understands telekinesis, the control of the basic electrical force of the universe by thought, just as the wise men of our earth understood it. The men who walked on the water, and moved mountains, and healed the sick.

"We can only attack it through its mind. We'll try to weaken its thought-force, destroy anything it sends against us."

His fingers flashed between the helmet radio and the repair kit which is a part of every vac suit, using wires, spare parts, tools.

"There," said Hilton, after a long time. "Now yours."

Falken gave him his helmet. "Won't the Sun-child know what we're doing?" he asked, rather harshly.

Hilton shook his fair head. "It's weak now. It won't think about us until it has fed. Perhaps two hours more."

"Can you read its thoughts?" demanded Falken sourly.

"A very little," said Hilton, and Sheila laughed, quietly.

Hilton worked feverishly. Falken watched his deft fingers weaving a bewildering web of wires between the three helmets, watched him shift and change, tune and adjust. He watched the sun-child throb and sparkle as the strength of the Sun sank into it. He watched Sheila Moore, staring at Hilton with eyes of brilliant green.

He never knew how much time passed. Only that the Sun-child gave a little rippling sigh of light and floated down. The fissure closed above it. Sheila caught her breath, sharp between her teeth.

Hilton rose. He said rapidly.

"I've done the best I can. It's crude, but the batteries are strong. The helmets will pick up and amplify the energy-impulses of our brains. We'll broadcast a single negative impulse, opposed to every desire the Sun-thing has.

"Stay close together, because if the wires are broken between the helmets we lose power, and it's going to take all the strength we have to beat that creature."

Falken put on his helmet. Little copper discs, cut from the sheet in the repair kit and soldered to wires with Hilton's blaster, fitted to his temples. Through the vision ports he could see the web of wires that ran from the three helmets through a maze of spare grids and a condenser, and then into the slender shaft of a crude directional antenna.

Hilton said, "Concentrate on the single negative, *No.*"

Falken looked at the lovely shimmering cloud, coming toward them.

"It won't be easy," he said grimly, "to concentrate."

Sheila's eyes were savage and feral, watching that foam of living flame. Hilton's face was hidden. He said,

"Switch on your radios."

Power hummed from the batteries. Falken felt a queer tingle in his brain.

The Sun-child hovered over them. Its mind-voice was silent, and Falken knew that the electrical current in his helmet was blanking his own thoughts.

They linked arms. Falken set his brain to beating out an impulse, like a radio signal, opposing the negative of his mind to the positive of the Sun-child's.

FALKEN stood with the others on spongy, yielding soil. Dim plant-shapes rose on all sides as far as he could see, forming an impenetrable tangle of queer geometric shapes that made him reel with a sense of spatial distortion.

Overhead, in a sea-green sky, three tiny suns wheeled in mad orbits about a common center. There was a smell in the air, a rotting stench that was neither animal or vegetable.

Falken stood still, pouring all his strength into that single mental command to stop.

The tangled geometric trees wavered momentarily. Dizzily, through the wheeling triple suns, the Sun-child showed, stabbed through with puzzled, angry scarlet.

The landscape steadied again. And the ground began to move.

It crawled in small hungry wavelets about Falken's feet. The musky, rotten smell was heavy as oil. Sheila and Hilton seemed distant and unreal, their faces hidden in the helmets.

Falken gripped them together and drove his brain to its task. He knew what this was. The reproduction of another world, remembered from the Sun-child's youth. If they could only stand still, and not think about it. . . .

He felt the earth lurch upward, and guessed that the Sun-child had raised its creation off the floor of the cavern.

The earth began to coil away from under his feet.

FOR a giddy instant Falken saw the true world far below, and the Sun-child floating in rainbow light.

It was angry. He could tell that from its color. Then suddenly the anger was drowned in a swirl of golden motes.

It was laughing. The Sun-child was laughing.

Falken fought down a sharp despair. A terrible fear of falling oppressed him. He heard Sheila scream. The world closed in again.

Sheila Moore looked at him from between two writhing trees.

He hadn't felt her go. But she was there. Hairly branches coiled around her, tore her vac-suit. She shrieked. . . .

Falken cried out and went forward. Something held him. He fought it off, driven by the agony in Sheila's cry.

Something snapped thinly. There was a flaring shock inside his helmet. He fell, and staggered up and on, and the hungry branches whipped away from the girl.

She stood there, her thin white body showing through the torn vac-suit, and laughed at him.

He saw Miner Hilton crawling dazed on the living ground, toward the thing that looked like Sheila and laughed with mocking golden motes in its eyes.

A vast darkness settled on Falken's soul. He turned. Sheila Moore crouched where he had thrown her from him, in his struggle to help the lying shell among the trees.

He went and picked her up. He said to Miner Hilton,

"Can we fix these broken wires?"

Hilton shook his head. The shock of the breaking seemed to have steadied him a little. "No," he said. "Too much burned out."

"Then we're beaten." Falken turned a bitter, snarling face to the green sky, raised one futile fist and shook it. Then he was silent, looking at the others.

Sheila Moore said softly, "This is the end, isn't it?"

Falken nodded. And Miner Hilton said, "I'm not afraid, now." He looked at the trees that hung over them, waiting, and shook his head. "I don't understand. Now that I know I'm going to die, I'm not afraid."

Sheila's green eyes were soft and mis-

ty. She kissed Hilton, slowly and tenderly, on the lips.

Falken turned his back and stared at the twisted ugly trees. He didn't see them. And he wasn't thinking of the Unregenerates and the world he'd won and then lost.

SHEILA'S hand touched him. She whispered, "Eric. . . ."

Her eyes were deep, glorious green. Her pale starved face had the brittle beauty of wind-carved snow. She held up her arms and smiled.

Falken took her and buried his gypsy face in the raw gold of her hair.

"How did you know?" he whispered. "How did you know I loved you?"

"I just—knew."

"And Hilton?"

"He doesn't love me, Eric. He loves what I stand for. And anyway . . . I can say this now, because we're going to die. I've loved you since I first saw you. I love you more than Tom, and I'd have died for him."

Hungry tree branches reached for them, barely too short. Buds were shooting up underfoot. But Falken forgot them, the alien life and the wheeling suns that were only a monstrous dream, and the Sun-child who dreamed them.

For that single instant he was happy, as he had not been since Kitty was lost.

Presently he turned and smiled at Hilton, and the wolf look was gone from his face. Hilton said quietly.

"Maybe she's right, about me. I don't know. There's so much I don't know. I'm sorry I'm not going to live to find out."

"We're all sorry," said Falken, "about not living." A sudden sharp flare lighted his eyes. "Wait a minute!" he whispered. "There may be a chance. . . ."

He was taut and quivering with terrible urgency, and the buds grew and yearned upward around their feet.

"You said we could only attack it through its mind. But there may be another way. Its memories, its pride. . . ."

He raised his scarred gypsy face to the green sky and shouted,

"You, Child of the Sun! Listen to me! You have beaten us. Go ahead and kill us. But remember this. You're a

child of the Sun, and we're only puny humans, little ground-crawlers, shackled with weakness and fear.

"But we're greater than you! Always and forever, greater than you!"

The writhing trees paused, the buds faltered in their hungry growth. Faintly, very faintly, the landscape flickered. Falken's voice rose to a ringing shout.

"You were a child of the Sun. You had the galaxy for a toy, all the vast depths of space to play in. And what did you do? You sealed yourself like a craven into a black tomb, and lost all your greatness in the whimsies of a wicked child.

"You were afraid of your destiny. You were too weak for your own strength. We fought you, we little humans, and our strength was so great that you had to beat us by a lying trick.

"You can read our minds, Sun-child. Read them. See whether we fear you. And see whether we respect you, you who boast of your parentage and dream dreams of lost glory, and hide in a dark hole like a frightened rat!"

FOR one terrible moment the alien world was suffused with a glare of scarlet—anger so great that it was almost tangible. Then it greyed and faded, and Falken could see Sheila's face, calm and smiling, and Hilton's fingers locked in hers.

The ground dropped suddenly. Blurred trees writhed against a fading sky, and the suns went out in ebon shadow. Falken felt clean earth under him. The rotting stench was gone.

He looked up. The Sun-child floated overhead, under the rocky vault. They were back in the cavern world.

The Sun-child's voice spoke in his brain, and its fires were a smoldering, dusky crimson.

"What was that you said, human?"

"Look into my mind and read it. You've thrown away your greatness. We had little, compared to you, but we kept it. You've won, but your very winning is a shame to you, that a child of the Sun should stoop to fight with little men."

The smoldering crimson burned and grew, into glorious wicked fire that was

sheer fury made visible. Falken felt death coiling to strike him out of that fire. But he faced it with bitter, mocking eyes, and he was surprised, even then, that he wasn't afraid.

And the raging crimson fire faded and greyed, was quenched to a trembling mist of sad, dim mauves.

"You are right," whispered the Sun-child. "And I am shamed."

The ashes of burned-out flame stirred briefly. "I think I began to realize that when you fought me so well. You, Falken, who let your love betray you, and then shook your fist at me. I could kill you, but I couldn't break you. You made me remember. . . ."

Deep in the core of the Sun-child there was a flash of the old proud scarlet.

"I am a child of the Sun, with the galaxy to play with. I have so nearly forgotten. I have tried to forget, because I knew that what I did was weak and shameful and craven. But you haven't let me forget, Falken. You've forced me to see, and know.

"You have made me remember. Remember! I am very old. I shall die soon, in open space. But I wish to see the Sun unveiled, and play again among the stars. The hunger has torn me for eons, but I was afraid. Afraid of death!

"Take this world, in payment for the pain I caused you. My creature will return here in Falken's ship and vanish on the instant of landing. And now. . . ."

The scarlet fire burned and writhed. Shafts of joyous gold pierced through it. The Sun-child trembled, and its little foaming flames, were sheer glory, the hearts of Sun-born opals.

It rose in the rainbow air, higher and higher, rushing in a cloud of living light toward the black crystal of the vault.

Once more there was a blinding flash and a quick sharp rush of air. Faintly, in Falken's mind, a voice said,

"Thank you, human! Thank you for waking me from a dying sleep!"

A last wild shout of color on the air. And then it was gone, into open space and the naked fire of the Sun, and the rocky roof was whole.

Three silent people stood on the raw red earth of a new world.



THE VIZIGRAPH

MARTIANS, Venusians, Saturians, Neptunians and Jerseyites—you're invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigraphs helpful and interesting.

The little trickle has become an avalanche. From five pages in the second issue of *PLANET* we went to ten in the last winter issue. This time, because there was too much wonderful entertainment to burn, the old *VIZIGRAPH* has gone to eleven. We can't do it again. After all, *PLANET* still claims to be a fiction magazine. The way things are going it would soon be composed solidly of letters. Of course we will continue to print the best letters that come in and it is with very real regret that we're placing a ceiling on this department. If the sky only were the limit!

The winning numbers are being posted. In the winter race its Win—Lesser; Place—Gifford; Show—Shaw.

YEAH—MAN

142 West 103d St.,
New York City.

DEAR EDITOR:

Yeah. Saw the Bok cover on *PLANET*. Unique. Nice color. Yeah. Not crowded all to pieces. Not like all the other covers. Yeah. Nice girl. Monster monster. Not very alien background, tho. Blue sky. Just like Earth. But nice. Yeah.

Looked at pitchers. Okay. Some of them that is. Lynch Lynch. Lynch steenks. No good for stf. For detective stories, okay. For western stories, okay. For bedroom stories, okay. But not *PLANET*. Bring out a new title for Lynch. Call it *Wench Stories*. Yeah.

Morey's good. Sometimes. He has imagination. Draws nice girls, sometimes. But draws good stf pictures.

Read *Vizigraph*. Okay. Gifford glorious. Asimov absent. Too bad. Gifford not exactly right about authors. All authors anyway. Give Gifford gifts. Subsidize him. Let him write the *Vizigraph*. Or most of it. Asimov can help. Conway will help if needed. Yeah.

Didn't read the Cummings story this time. New title, I see. Must be tough on you. Have to think up a new title every time you use the Cummings story. Can't use same title twice. But still same story. Yeah. Tough on artists, too. Why not save printers trouble? Why not save artists trouble? Just publish synopsis of Cummings story. Run it each issue. Give story different title if you must. But use different artist each time. So they don't have to re-read story each time. Announce artist on cover. Like this: Cummings, illustrated by Paul. Only Paul's read the Cummings story. Try someone else. On second thought forget title for story. Who cares about that?

Yeah. On third thought forget about synopsis. Everyone's read that. On third thought give artist a story by someone else. Yeah.

Read letters about Hall's picture. Yeah. Some of PLANET's readers are goops. Sometimes. Hall's picture not so bad. Better than Lynch. Better than most past covers. Better than some of Morey. Better than some of Paul. Not too good of course. But better than . . . sorry. Almost repeated myself. Yeah.

Hall's drawing nice. Like Hall. Well, not as good as Hall. Hall's nifty. Swell gal. Gorgeous you might say. Lovely in fact. Marrying wrong man of course. Just like a woman. Always doing it. Yeah. I'd like that original. If it's still available. If no one else has claimed it. If ye ed hasn't salted it away himself. Lots of goops among PLANET readers. Don't know art when they see it. Yeah.

Stories pretty good this time. PLANET seldom disappoints. On stories, that is. Covers usually bad. Pictures usually poor. But stories good. Yeah. Should come out more often. Should have captions under illustrations. Should have better artists. Like Forte. Like Knight. Like Dolgov. Like Wesso. Needs more Bok. Needs more Angus Dun. Needs more of this guy Stevens. Yeah.

PLANET's good. Been good for a long time. Getting in a rut. Just good. Needs broader scope. Needs new authors. Less of the Cummings story. Needs humor. We wanta laugh. In the stories we fight, see? We suffer, see? We go places, see? We save worlds, see? We save universes, see? We save wenches, see? But do we have any fun? Naw.

We need humor. Screwball stuff. Not a lot. Just some. Not just in special funny stories. Humor in nearly all stories. Everyone laughs sometimes. Everyone makes funny cracks sometimes. There's at least one amusing situation in every story. If the author ain't afraid to tell about it. Yeah. Humor. Like in Bob Tucker's stories. Like in Dick Wilson's stories. Like in S. D. Gottesman's stories. Like in Martin Pearson's "Ajax Calkins" stories. Terrific. Yeah.

That's all for now. Yeah. You can print this if you like. I don't mind. Readers can vote for it, too, if they like. Don't mind that, either. You can send me that Hall original if you like. That's okay, too. Or the Stevens if someone else got there first. Good man, Stevens.

Oh yeah. Nearly forgot. PLANET needs stories by Conway. Yeah. Keep you out of a rut. Keep Conway out of the poorhouse. Keep readers from getting too smugly content. Yeah.

truly yours,

W. KERMIT CONWAY III.

SO, HAH!

DEAR CONWAY,

So you like Bok. Hah. Whamsamatter Lynch? You don't like his women. Too goodlooking. Too wenchy. What have sf fans got agin good-looking gals? Ain't there to be any women in the future? Hah.

Glad stories good. Artists will get better. Look at Leydenfrost. Not bad we think. Hah. Hah.

You want humor. You want fun. Hah, you got fun. Read Brown. "The Star Mouse." Make you laugh? Make you cry? Funniest story since Ring Lardner maybe. Hah. Hah. Hah.

Like your way of writing. "Yeah" stuff.

Great. Lotsa fun. From now on will try it in my business correspondence. Come again. Hah.

THE EDITOR.

TERRIFIC NEW IDEA FOR PLANET

5359 Raphael St.,
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, it looks as though the Guy Gifford stuck out his little neck. I've already had several letters wanting me to send Horrorscopes, and a couple insinuating that I was batty in mentioning that a writer's individuality is buried beneath his so-called style.

I can take it. I've been kicked around so much that every time anyone lifts his foot I bend over.

But mebbe we can pep up Science friction. It needs it.

I'm busier than a newsboy in a rainstorm, but in my spare moments I give Science Fiction some thought. I think it will soon move into the slicks, and there is a possibility of a guy I know who runs an animated cartoon studio putting out a series of Cosmic Comedies.

I'd like to sell you a series of full page cartoons—one per issue—The Title is "The Ringer Family." And the situations are built around a family who farm one of the worlds of a certain system in a neighboring Galaxy.

We can pack it with detail—these fans love detail. All shading done by stippling which of course adds to the unworldliness. The animals, of course are not bug-eyed but they'll be different. I'm enclosing a couple of hurried roughs and I'd like your reaction.

I think you have a peach of a mag. You are going places.

Sincerely,

GUY GIFFORD.

SOME GUYS NEED IT MORE THAN GUY

DEAR GIFFORD,

I don't know why they should be kicking you around. There are lots of Guys that need it more than you. But that's Science Fiction for you. Always fighting. Always hoopalaing. Put 'em all in the army, I say.

Your "Ringer Family" cartoon roughs look terrific. It's a grand idea. Something new, too. If old PLANET Stories can find the money in its sock we'll run 'em, starting with the Stork idea. Or maybe you ought to go back beyond that. You know, first landing. . . . Let me hear in re. to price. Hope the Boilerhouse Gang will like it.

Excuse the style, Conway's got me going. Yeah.

THE EDITOR.

IN NO. 2 SPOT

700 East North Street
Opelousas, Louisiana

DEAR EDITOR:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for the beautiful original drawing I did not receive in today's mail. You remember which one it was, don't you? It was Yehudi's masterpiece of the invisible man throwing chunks of non-existent matter at the little monster who wasn't there.

Or do you get it yet? To put it more plainly, I was disgusted, discouraged, disappointed, dis-

mayed and down right suspicious. Why didn't I win first place? Why didn't I win second or third place? Why? Why?

After long hours of brooding meditation I have come to one great conclusion. The letter poll was FIXED! Saul there was to it. . . . THE VIZIGRAPH gets three thorough readings before the fiction gets its first, and it is now a definitely established fact that without said department PS would be little better than an average mag, instead of the cream of the crop.

A moldy mush melon to Mr. Marlow who wants to boil me in oil. He's a fiendish fellow, that Marlow. So Eron and Smalle are good, eh? Next he'll be screaming he's Napoleon.

The "Hoimit" crawls out of his den long enough to cast a vote for me! His "System" rating system was both amoozing and confoozing, and helps to earn him my paltry nod for the first place. Then, too, he has the right idea on everything. . . . except my letters.

Oddly enough there won't be any votes for Gifford in this letter. Genius'll probably win first place, but I'm not going to help him. Second notch must and shall go to Milt Lesser who likes what I like and third to the worthy letters of both Stoy and Heiner.

Pardon, Mr. Editor, but I'd like to correct you on one thing. Or do you allow such brazenry? Bond's use of Wellman's petal-pussed martians was anything BUT coincidental. Nelson obtained Manly's special permission to use them in "Shadrach" and "The Lorelei Death."

Eventually, I will get around to commenting on the various sundries that all fans inevitably discuss, i.e., the cover, the illustrations, yarns, so without further ado we shall plunge into this insipid subject. (Alas! Poor editors.)

The cover: That girl! Must be cancer. . . . or cholera. . . . or sumpin'. That man! Wild eyes fixed in a very, very rude stare while little red crawfish rush him. As a whole it was—'twill be blasphemy, I warn you—was passable. The other fans will be all for it, but I did not like it.

The interiors were fair. Most notable was the cataclysmic change in Morey, who, previous to this was utterly intolerable is now *good*! Paul is anything but deteriorating. His last was the second best pic to appear in PS thus far. (Best was his for "Invaders of the Forbidden Moon.") Lynch for Bond: Well. . . . Lynch for Moskowitz: Bon! Lynch for Connell: poor, but the two page spread book jacket idea is commendable. My suggestion would be to lynch Lynch, but you'd never do that. He must be a cousin or sumpin'.

Bok: poorest yet, and poor for the first time. Morey for Wells: This is one thing I am vehemently opposed to. This same pic was used back in an early issue; don't do this again, please! But this has already been stricken out by Editor's darting blue pencil. . . .

Morey for Lewis: V. G. Morey for Norman: Marked improvement. Stevens: Promising. The artists get their by-lines now. Good.

Though nothing comparable to the quality of the stories in past issues, those in the winter number were as a whole a fine collection. Some putrid, some poor, some fair, some good and one or two so damn perfect that it leaves us with a good opinion of old PS no matter how lousy the others were.

The "doggone good" story in this issue was Moskowitz's "Man of the Stars." Sam, though

still a beginner, has the deft touch of an old master mingled with the distinctive freshness of a fellow with *NEW* ideas. This last was one of the best written pieces I have ever read, and in my private little book it shall be jotted down in scarlet ink with "Classic" scrawled beneath it. The sheer entertainment I got out of Connell's "Future-detective" piece makes me place it easily second. Frankly, it had two strikes on it when it faced me, but I had to smile approval when I finished it. At last a heroine is killed. Too, too bad. . . .

ASTOUNDINGLY enough, third goes to a short. Norman has done plenty of poor work in the past, but he impressed me with his absent minded intellects and thusly the laurels for third are gladly given the Normanuscript.

When Bond sold you "The Lorelei Death" he turned out the worst bit of work that he has ever done for PS. Good enough, yes, but somehow I did not take to it. The appeal N. S. B. gave these same characters in "Shadrach," was lost in this last.

"Zurk," a nice little yarn which came to a very obvious climax and end, gains fifth with a struggle. "The Mercurian" cops sixth. Nothing sensational but when you have nine yarns per ish, I'll forgive you such as this. Henry Hasse's martian thigh yarn was a tense little bit to say the least, and well earns a couple of mild "Hip, hips!"

First Cummings got stuck in an "atom people" rut and now all he can think of is robots. About the last five or six yarns I have read have been about wild metal men, screaming dames loping along just out of the reach of fiendish automatons, with drawn-faced, bulge-eyed heroes a length or two ahead of the girls. Come on, Ray. How about some of your "old" stuff?

"The Monster Asteroid" was probably the most formulated piece I have ever read. The plot was moldy and well used, the characters the same that have been used many, many times, both by Cummings himself and all the rest. But —there had to be *one* bad one.

Wells has done better for fanmags, far better in fact, than he did for you. Sad to say, "Queen of the Blue World" was really, really bad. Yzaps-thuftars-teknaj-jokar Ged. . . . Friend Wells must have a hut sut complex.

Ah, well, my feeble efforts have reached an end. I doubt if this will gain one of those much honored berths in Ye VIZIGRAPH, for I am sending this pretty late. Anyway, here's—no, I shan't hope.

Farewell, then, until the spring issue. Keep plugging; you're second place now!

Very sincerely,

ALFRED E. MAXWELL.
"The Macabre One"

FIRST WOULD BE FINER

DEAR MR. MAXWELL,

Is it fair, I ask you? In the first part of the letter you inform us that PLANET is now the "cream of the crop." I quote your own words. At the conclusion you say we're in second place. It is obvious that the latter is your honest opinion and we shall observe it as such. Before we're through however we'll have you confessing that PS rates No. 1—and by a full length, not merely a nose.

An apology is owed you and all other PS readers for the Morey drawing on the Wells

story. One of our artists disappointed at the last minute and we were forced to catch a pickup job quick. It shouldn't happen again. Optimistically,

THE EDITOR.

ESCAPED THE SUBS

82 Ramsgrave Drive,
Blackburn,
Lancs.,
England.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have at long last decided to write to you about "PLANET STORIES," that none-too-perfect sf. magazine. When a friend of mine told me he'd managed to wangle through the official regulations, and get an application for a foreign money order passed, and asked me if I wanted to sub. 10/- to PLANET I cursed and cursed. I wanted to know why he couldn't have got a sub. out to a better mag. But nevertheless I accepted, and duly received some back issues I wanted. They had just been posted at the right time, as at that time there was a convoy leaving Canada for here and they came over with it (or so I believe) closely guarded. Otherwise I might never have seen them with all the sinkings that are occurring now. Another funny thing too, the Fall '41 issue also came over at the time when a convoy was leaving for here. I am now suspicious, and think of you as dashing up to Canada every week or so to see if there is a convoy leaving, so that you can send PLANET's over here in safety. However keep it up for as long as my sub. lasts (not very long now I fear) and I will be quite satisfied.

One of the reasons for writing this letter is to appeal to some of the bright (?) readers of PLANET for magazines. You see we can't get them over here now, and can only manage once in a while to get a sub. out. Thus we rely almost entirely on the generosity of American fans, who keep us going by sending us the latest editions of the mags. So how about helping me, some of you guys? In exchange I am willing to send you any British stuff, reprints of two American prozines, Britain's one and only sf. pro mag., fanzines or whatever you want that I can lay my hands on. Well, come on, be sports, you haven't anything to lose, but a lot to gain as copies of the British sf. mag. are rare and dear in U. S. Thanks in advance as I just know there's some swell guys who are going to send me something.

Now to comment on PLANET. It's no good commenting on any definite issue, as by the time you get this (if you get it at all) the comments will be quite out-of-date, and will only make boring reading. So let's study the covers first. Those on issues 1, 2, & 3 were very much the same. Though well drawn, they represent what is the dregs of sf.—sex appeal. Why must you plaster the covers with half nude women? Though easy on the eyes, they do not suit sf., and should be relegated to "The Night Life of Fanlight Fanny" or something like that in which we know what to expect. Sure a Nice woman will do NOW AND AGAIN, but put some clothes on 'em. Don't get me wrong, I like pictures of half (?) nude women, but not in sf. mags. The covers on Nos. 4 & 5 were striking, but still persisted with the women (though they were not as seductive) and the horrible alien monstrosities (never friendly to humanity) or the big bad

men who get shot at the end. No. 6's cover was too putrid to comment on, perfectly and awfully foul. No. 7—ah! Finlay. Superb. He has a haunting and dainty style in his semi-weird pics. which are very beautiful. The girl on the front is a perfectly life-like figure, executed with the touch of a true artist. If you never had another decent story or cover I would always remember the one really good one you gave us. More Finlay if possible. No. 8. Paul. A swell artist who can really do some swell stuff when he wants, but this—lousy. Paul is swell at machinery, and landscapes etc. but his humans are usually poor. This is no exception. Look at the girl (half undressed again); human??? Human my eye. Thanks for getting Paul, but no thanks for the lousy effort he turned out. So much for covers. The interiors are too numerous and varied to comment on, let it suffice to say that they have improved but are no where near perfect by a long way.

The stories; well here are the ones I enjoyed (and by the way, the stories are getting worse): —No. 1—"Expedition to Pluto." No. 2—The Tantalus Death, & The Dictator of Time (for some screwy reason). No. 3—The Forbidden Dream (super smashing Exiles of the Three Red Moons, Cosmic Juggernaut (one Fearn yarn I actually liked), Sphere of the Never-Dead. No. 4—Ultimate Salient (nothing new, and yet somehow it clicked), The Planet that Time Forgot. No. 5—Twilight of The Tenth World, One Thousand Miles Below (a poorly written hackneyed plot, but somehow it clicked). No. 6—Exiles of the Desert Star, Vampire of the Void (though this is what I class as a weird yarn), the Monster Who Threatened the Universe, Treasure of Triton. No. 7—Invaders of the Forbidden Moon, The Ballad of Blaster Bill (something out of the ordinary for a sf. mag. and a pleasant change), Genesis!, World of Mockery. No. 8—The Victory of Klon, Dead Man's Planet. From that you may gather that I like Ross Rocklynne, and R. R. Winterbotham. Any stories not mentioned above vary from fair to awful, and quite a lot are on the latter side.

However though PLANET may not be the best by a long way, it is far from being the worst. You are one of the best editors in the field for this reason. You aren't nearly equal to 90% of the other Editors of sf. mags., but you are fairly new to the game. But in spite of this handicap you are trying to improve the mag., and give the readers what they require within reason. You add the personal touch to the magazine, and that is a lot. While I write this I am thinking that how ever poor this letter may be, it will be read by you personally and read as one man to another, and not as a worm to a man. You are not snooty like some editors; you give the impression of saying, "We're all pals together." This is one thing that makes PLANET click with me. I'd buy it at any rate for my collection, but 'tis far better to buy, read and enjoy, than to just buy.

So I will come to an end now, hoping that you will at least print my appeal for mags. I will send this original off tonight and a carbon copy in a fortnight's time. This is a better way than just sending one letter, it doesn't matter if you get two, but it does if you don't get any at all.

Bet you ten-to-one America's in the war within the year. My very best wishes to you, and all other American sf. readers, and let's get together and put this motheaten little moon-struck maniac Hitler where he belongs—a helluva depth underground. So will sign off now, wishing PLANET every success in the future—I'll be with you regularly again when the war's over (if I'm not pushing up daisies). Cheerio and all the very best,

G. E. RENNISON.

Ed. Note: The original letter failed to reach us and is probably in Davey Jones' dept. The carbon arrived in good shape.

THE HAPPY GENIUS—

2302 Avenue O
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

There comes a time once every three months when a certain editor, in a certain city, editing a certain very popular mag moans and groans and pulls the hair out of his head . . . if he has any. He is sitting at his desk with doggies up on the polished mahogany calmly reading all the crazy notes received via the viziwaves. And then it comes. "This again!" He yelps apprehensively. Then he opens it, and groans to a fourth vice president who at the time is cleaning up the floor. "Quick, Louie, take this down to the print room. I can't bear to look at another one by him. Print it and get it out of my sight. Ohhhh. Why was I ever born? Why did I have to take an interest in science-fiction?" "Of course, sir." Comes the courteous reply, "Now, I would suggest . . ." "Get out!" Calmly says the ed as he throws a paper weight at the retreating figure of the nut.

The editor is you, Planeteer; the offending letter writer is y'rs truly and once again I plague you. But as it happens, this time, with less bricks than any other.

Amazing, isn't it?

One thing, tho. You are taxing my poor, tiny brain to capacity. How? By printing ten pages of Vizigrams, every last one of them good. Howinell am I supposed to pick out the three best? Ah, well, the dauntless soul never gives up . . . here goes . . .

One letter is the very best you have had the privilege of printing to date. A masterpiece. I'll even bet this guy could write good stories, if the right editor saw them. His letter starts on page one-twenty-three. Amazing, so does mine. The author's name is Lesser. What a startling coincidence, so is mine! In fact, I see he lives at twenty-three-o-two Avenue O, in Brooklyn. Imagine that. So do I! Why after all, he is me. Ahem, I can have my own opinion, can't I? Or can I? In second place is Alf Maxwell with his interesting comments. But this guy is too bashful. Whasamatta, Alf? Why don't you admit it? Well, "Vassals of the Master World" is not only among my twenty favorites, but it is the top tale I have ever read. I'm sure Mr. Maxwell feels the same way, he's just shy. And while I'm at it. Other stories of notably high caliber to come from the pages of PLANET were: "One Thousand Miles Below," "The Ultimate Salient," "The Cosmic Juggernaut," "The Cosmic Derelict," "Exiles of the Desert Star," "Man of the Stars," "Twilight of the Tenth World," "Proktols of Neptune," "Sargasso of the Stars," "Invaders of the Forbidden Moon" and perhaps one

or two others. Third, with a good letter, is Bill Stoy who, I believe started the Zwinlik mess. If you have one of these Alpha Centaurians on hand, please send it to him, orange eyes and all. Maybe then he'll shut up . . . (you hope).

Seriously, the Viz is just about the right size, now, and really swell.

The stories, too, were on an upgrade this issue. One was super-superb, two were excellent, three were V.G., two were fair, and one was perhaps slightly on the N.G. side of the fence.

"Man of the Stars" by Sam Moskowitz was unchallenged for the number one spot. The surprising thing is that the author's first offer in summer was terrible. This latest yarn, it seems was rushed through. Change slightly the title of a popular song and you now have: "Sam, you've made the tale too short!" Say, Ed, why don't you have a long novel in each issue. Just look at the acclaim Binder's in fall received. All letters except one that were printed gave it first place. And I'll venture to say that Binder is better than Smith! By the way, Moskowitz, in my estimation, is already "up there."

Second is Ray Cumming's newest variation of his pet theme, "Monster of the Asteroid." I really dreaded to start it, but once I did, I couldn't stop. It was weird. That is a quality Ray has never used before. Heiner will sure be tickled to see his favorite turn out stuff like this. Alf Maxwell, too, who has so painstakingly asked for the real Cumming's "stuff" has had his wish.

Henry Hasse's "Thief of Mars" is refreshing and in the third spot. This author is consistently good, and you should be proud to have him. Ditto Binder, Fearn and Rocklynne.

"A Planet For Your Thoughts" by James Norman is fourth. His style is somewhat pleasant since we have been fed on a "name" diet for so long; some of them good, others contrary. I would suggest a half-and-half variety.

Fifth is the attempt of another newcomer to the mag. Richard O. Lewis's "Zurk" was full of suspense. And style. More, that is my comment.

"The Mercurian" by still another new addition is sixth. Frank Belknap Long. It was good, that is undeniable. I never did like FBL's way of writing, this was all right, tho.

Next comes a disappointment. By Nelson S. Bond. I'm surprised. "The Lorelei Death" used the age old theme of an adventurer finding a girl, the only daughter of an aged scientist who is captured by pirates and held prisoner on a barren planetoid. Let alone that, Bond uses a plot that Gallum did about a year ago in another mag. RZG's was much better, too.

Eighth, and still in the category of "fair" is Basil Well's "Queen of the Blue World." Nothing much to this one. But it really wasn't bad.

Alan Connell made a very childish attempt at his "Espionage In Space." Allen Connell is decidedly a dislike. No plot to speak of, bad style, comic-book writing. No more.

I like your idea of italicizing the stories instead of using quotation marks. At least it shows originality.

The art, too, was on the upgrade; and how! Frinstance, Bok's cover was the very best

you have ever had. It was also the best I've seen in s-f for the better part of a year. Your best inside pick was Paul's for Cummings yarn. And it was the best he has ever done for you. Better, too, Mr. Hidley take note, than the great Salient pic. Lynch is second with his full pager fronting the issue's best story. Don's others were no good; space wasting as the fans seem to have it. Morey did average work. And now comes the major criticism of the number. What strange part of your mind (?) made you reprint Morey's pic from the third ish. Once before you did a similar thing, and I politely kept my yap shut. The drawing originally done for "Exiles of the Three Red Moons" was good, but once is enough. Never, never again. The two surprise bits of art were (1) by Stevens, your new find. Great. (2) By Bok, his pic was terrible! And that is all for the art except that I'd like to say your artist bylines are a swell idea.

After Maxwell started this "let's have" business, I've got a new one:

Gimmie, see; More Binder, Some of Wellman and Hamilton, plenty of Paul, Bok on the cover, large novels and either the Paul, Lynch for Moskowitz or Stevens pic if this merits one.

I don't want, see; Connell, Wells, the space-wasting type of pic, the terrible namer or terrible newcomer and Drake.

I'll raise the dickens if ya don't have, see; a large Viz, Lynch's good pics, more of the great Lesser letters and an improving issue each time.

The bragging beauty bellowing bombshells and bricks all the way from beflamed Betelgeuse to the bashful bums of Brooklyn is now signing off,

MILT LESSER.

Ed. Note: Lesser should kick about a longer Vizigraph! Even if it were confined to one page, he'd probably still cop off the pics.

MOSKY UNHORSED BY KNIGHT

142 West 103rd St.
New York City.

DEAR EDITOR:

Despite the fact that Johnny is playing the radio very loudly in my ear, and refuses to turn it down, I think I can still collect my thoughts sufficiently to write you my opinions of "Man of the Stars," by our dearly beloved Sam Moskowitz. Because, O Editor, that was a very bad story indeed.

It was so extremely and startlingly bad, in fact, that I am impelled to write about it instead, as is usual when this sort of thing happens to me, of simply putting the magazine away and waiting hopefully for the odor to dissipate.

Let me review the story in question, considering its more novel features as I come across them. So this spaceship is flitting to Saturn, commanded through some bureaucratic bloomer by a man who apparently knows nothing whatever about his job. So they come to Saturn's rings and proceed to batter their way through them, the first to succeed in doing so. I quote: "No one had ever penetrated the great rings of Saturn. . . . A half dozen expeditionary parties had perished in its rings."

Why, Lord, why? Space-ships are supposed to be able to move in three dimensions; it shouldn't be much of a job to go AROUND

the rings. I once saw a man trying to force his way laterally through a row of trees instead of walking either in the street or on the sidewalk; but he was drunk, so there was some excuse for him.

So they land on Saturn and the narrator goes out in a small ship with ye hero to explore and they crash. So the narrator breaks both legs, but he still has sense enough to pull on an airliner. But not our hero! He picks up the narrator and staggers out into the boiling air, breathing the almost-liquid atmosphere, because in a world of such enormous gas volume there is enough of the essential oxygen to sustain life for a short time in an emergency.

Okay, let's compare this with what few facts are known about Saturn. A, Saturn is cold—something like 180° below zero Centigrade. (And liquid hell burnt about him. Swirled and eddied in tormenting, steaming heat. Burnt into his skin, his mouth, into his eyes. How could a man walk and breathe and live in air like that?) Okay, how could he? B, the atmosphere of Saturn is full of cute little things like ammonia and methane. C, it has been estimated that the surface pressure is on the order of 10,000,000 lbs. to the square inch. I quote: "Lord!"

So the hero, still carrying the narrator (each of them weighs about 50 pounds or so more than Earth norm), staggers off a cliff. Now comes the beautiful part. Get this. He reaches up as the two of them are toppling off and catches the rim of the precipice with one hand. Then, with one hand, still carrying the narrator with the other—supporting an estimated weight of about 500 pounds with that one hand—he pulls the two of them back up over the rim. Speechless with awe, I quote: "That hand should have been torn from its socket!" You're damn right, Mosky, it should have been.

And so why wasn't it? Because, as far as I can see, our hero is given the Strength of Ten by the power of his great love. Please, please, Mr. M., molecular cohesion is molecular cohesion, and so is cellular cohesion, and so is muscular strength, and what has love got to do with any of them?

So then they blast off and get caught in an ether storm and flit all the way to Alpha Centauri in a matter of hours. This is a little hard to swallow, but well within the bounds of auctorial license. Then, however, when they get ready to go back, the Centaurians put a little pill in their fuel-tank. So they make the return journey—4½ light-years—in days. Because, of course, the little pill increased the efficiency of their fuel.

But did it negate their inertia, so that they could undergo accelerations which they normally couldn't stand except as a thin film of slime? Mosky doesn't say, but I doubt it. I don't think the idea ever occurred to him.

Excuse me now, please; I'm going to read some air stories and westerns to get the taste out of my mouth.

Yours ever,

DAMON KNIGHT.

PLANET'S BUDDING POET'S CORNER

208 So. Oakhurst Dr.
Beverly Hills, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

A B C D E F G,

I read Planet regularly,

I love it, and it loves me.

But that doesn't make any difference; I've still never won one of those delicious pics Planet is passing out so carelessly. (Note: This poem was not written by Raymond Washington Jr.) Oh well, here I am trying again; this time with poetry. But there's a sneaking suspicion somewhere down inside me that my poem isn't the thing that brings the pics. Be that as it may, I must once again comment on the cover. At first I liked it, (of course the fact that I was in the middle of a blackout has nothing to do with it) but when the lights finally did come on, I turned my gaze downwards and really found out what it looked like. COSMIC CENTRIFUGLES!!! What are your covers coming to. I don't mind the customary B.E.G.s, but when you have women flying through the air on water skis and being pulled by big red birds, that's too much. I once more beg you: Please let's have a good cover. Why not have Morey do one. You call yourself Planet Stories, so wouldn't a space ship cover be all right? Morey is the master of space ships. Get the hint?

Well, lets forget the art and come to your yarns. I must say you're really improving in this department. Binder's in the fall issue was tops. In the winter ish, the stories were so good that it was pretty hard to classify them. First place, however, goes to Connell for his "Espionage In Space." Bond and Moskowitz were also very good and just for a change Cummings wasn't on the bottom. No, that was especially reserved for the cover story—Queen of the Blue World.

The Vizigraph was most terrifically exceptionally good this month. Old man Gifford deserves a pic and Stoy works awful hard at his missives. Give Lesser an old Lynch and that settles that. I hereby wish to have it known that I have an idea how to settle the Gifford, Asimov quandry. It's simple. All you have to do is have Asimov write an article and send it to California and have Gifford illustrate it. Then the finished product is sent to Planet and hence, you have something everybody will like. I suppose its time for me to shut my big trap and go crawl in a dark corner some place 'cause I hear those sirens again. Soon L.A. 'll be blacker than a Lynch illustration so—so-long.

A. VERITY.

GADZOOKS!

The Chastleton
Washington, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

Gadzooks! And other expressions of surprise, amazement, happiness and . . . and *where is my Thesaurus?* Finding that my first letter was published was pleasure enough, but to find later on that I had won first place . . . well . . . the warwhoop woke the other half of our corporation out of a sound sleep. She thought the building was on fire.

I find that I was a bit premature . . . and mixed up, for upon looking in the fall issue (you know, the one with the garish, gaudy gob of goo by Paul, on the cover) and seeing prizes being given to Gifford, Marlow and Wells, I concluded that all was lost. The tingling thrill of my first published letter was still playing hopscotch up and down my vertebrae though and I didn't mind so much. Then on Thanksgiving evening I found a copy of the winter issue on the stands. (Yes, I know I was late, but these d.... dealers pick the darndest places to put magazines.) Later on, at home, I turned to the

Vizigraph, with the result mentioned above. Speaking of the evolution of a Vizigraph reader, which I wasn't, it is interesting to note that with the first two issues, the stories came first, then for lack of anything else to read, I turned to that department. Now, the first thing I do is turn to the Vizigraph. However, I am not of the opinion as some of these chaps are, namely, that you should chuck all the manuscripts in your safe out the nearest window. Enlarge it, if you will, but not at the cost of sacrificing the stories.

Now for a second breath and a rating on the stories in the winter issue. That bet you made about Moskowitz, was a pretty safe bet, wasn't it? I rate it as one of the best I have read in some time, a definite first place for *Man of the Stars*. Second place for *Espionage in Space*. Perhaps my faculties are getting dim with the passing years, but believe it or not, I was surprised at the ending. *Zurk* takes third, and fourth place goes to *A Planet for your Thoughts*. You know, Norman reminds me faintly of Nat Schachner. These new buds that blossomed are a bit of all right. Let's have more by them. Fifth place for *Thief of Mars* and sixth to *Lorelei Death*. I have a feeling Bond is doing some pot-boiling here, but even so, I like the characters he created. *The Mercurian* takes seventh, and eighth for *Monster of the Asteroid*. Despite the nostalgia engendered by Paul's illustration, I think Cummings is in a rut. (Watch me get bounced for that one!) I read and read *Queen of the Blue World* and still didn't get anywhere, so . . . last place.

Is anyone still reading? Well, then, brickbats and bouquets on the illustrations. Lynch rates gardenias (I like them better than orchids) for the Bond and Connell stories, he should stick to that kind of work, in my mind. The work on *Man of the Stars* was not bad, except for the heat waves. That scratchy business is what I'd like to see Lynch get away from. At first glance I thought it had been scratched out and printed by mistake. Morey is almost invariably good; I remember him from way back. Stevens' illustration was all right, it reminded me of the scene in the motion picture version of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues*. Paul's, as I said was nostalgic, but I'm glad you only use one of his to an issue. Incidentally, I want to repeat, why not try Lynch on a cover? And speaking of covers, which I was, I offer you a challenge. Use just one cover with plain letters, instead of zooming Saturns, cut down a bit on the color, or at least use larger masses of it, have one central figure, a rocket ship or what have you, but no Zwiilks. In other words, add a touch of dignity, and that doesn't mean sedateness or drabness. If the circulation fails to go up on that issue, I'll accept my fate quietly and never, never write another protest that begins with "shall we take the cover?" Furthermore, if I lose, I'll accept any penalty that you or the patrons of the Vizigraph see fit to deal out. (But don't let Marlow vote on the penalty!) Incidentally, Mr. Marlow, the chappie who wants me dunked in a hot unctuous liquid, objects to my objecting to one ad. If a person tripped and fell down a flight of stairs once, and stopped, that would be fine. However, if the same person fell down the same flight of stairs once a day and twice on Sundays, wouldn't it be disconcerting, to say nothing of the effect on the anatomy? In my opinion it would be a good idea to fix the loose board on the top step

and avoid all that. (Or is the analogy too far fetched?) By the way, does Mr. Marlow use banana oil, or just the *old* oil?

While on the subject of personalities, *muchas gracias* to Wellington, Shaw, Lesser, Brackett and Stoy for the kind words . . . yes, and even Marlow, for wasn't it Voltaire or Zilch who said: "they can talk about me as much as they wish, as long as they mention my name."

The plums in my opinion should be dished out, first to Larry Shaw, (and this is *not* collusion), second to Alfred Maxwell, and third to Milton Lesser (still no collusion!)

Suggestion Department: How about a credit line for the cover artist, maybe on the contents page? If it hadn't been for a statement in the Vizigraph and the scaly, green *slogblop* I doubt if I would have recognized Bok. (I may get kicked around for this one, but the other suggestion was received with such good grace I thought I'd at least try.)

One more suggestion is to give the proof readers a bit of a vacation. I've noticed quite a few errors, some of them that looklikethis (exaggeration, of course) and some likethis. Those were not so bad, but when they misplace a whole line as on page eighty, bottom of the first column, and sidetrack me from the story, I object. However, that was only *one* case also, so I'd better shut up . . . or get boiled in oil. (P.S. was it Shakespeare or Dubarry who said, "it's the little things that count?")

I was going to protest about such long letters in the Vizigraph, but after shuffling back to the first page of this epistle, I know *darn* well I'd better shut up!

Thanks Mr. Reiss, for a swell magazine; being editor is sort of a cross between guardian angel and general nurse maid, isn't it?

WILLIAM A. CONOVER.

Ed. Note: I feel that Leydenfrost's cover should be a tonic for those tired old eyes of yours, Mr. Conover. Also the same artist's inside illustration. And how do you like Lynch's flight into realms of fancy in "The Star-Mouse"? Neat, eh?

RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

174 Windsor Place
Brooklyn, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

It is with great reluctance that I begin pounding Ye Old Typewriter with intent (both malicious and aforethought) to perpetrate another letter to the Vizigraph. As is well-known in science-fiction circles, I am constitutionally averse to publicity. The white-hot glare of the spotlight makes me shrink like any violet. I've got an overcoat with special flaps on it to hide my face in when passers-by whisper to one another, "There goes Asimov!" Yes, and I've got a hat with a special steel lining to deflect the bricks that the passers-by then throw in my direction.

Anyway, I mean it. For once I'm going to be serious, and concise, too. I believe there is a story somewhere in this issue that has been perpetrated by me, and I guess that's enough Asimov for one sitting.

Besides, there's always at least one wise guy who's sure to write in. "Dear Editor: Asimov's letter was better than his story" (damn fool) and so you can bet I'm going to write a lousy letter.

So, without wasting any more time, here goes.

Dear Gifford: What makes you think the name Asimov is a jaw-breaker. It's pronounced exactly as spelled, except that the "s" is sounded as a "z". All the vowels are short and the accent is on the first syllable. Pronounce it a few times and see—only not where anyone can hear you, or they'll drag you in for muttering obscenities. They still remember me out West, you see.

As for the rain-barrel, you're right in saying there isn't much rain in Texas. However, occasionally, we get some of the overflow from one of your frequent Los Angeles cloudbursts, and the barrel comes in handy to float down stream in. And don't tell me it doesn't rain in California, because I don't listen to Bob Hope for nothing.

Dear Mrs. Wells: I've been measuring six feet off against the wall and shadow-boxing at it, and, to be frank, I don't like it. Couldn't you trade your husband in for a five-footer? They're so much easier to handle, Margie—for you and for me. However, I reject with disdain the suggestion that I'm softening up with regard to women in science-fiction stories. I'm *still* agin them—but only, be it remarked, in science-fiction stories. But don't, *please* don't, say I'm a woman-hater. I don't care for myself, but there are at least seventy-five girls out here in the metropolitan area that would laugh themselves into blue fits of apoplexy if I were called a woman-hater in their hearing. I don't want that to happen. I'd have to find seventy-five more.

Dear Wellington: Well, well, so the guy that licked Napoleon is taking pot-shots at me. It's quite an honor. On the other hand, James, aren't you being slightly unfair? I imagine there exist people in this world (low-grade morons, undoubtedly) that would call my junk, "junk," *after* reading it; but you're the first that calls my junk, "junk," *before* reading it. Come, come, Iron Duke, that is not cricket. Is that the game as its played on the playing-fields of Eton?

And that crack about "if he is trying to be an author"—that is the unkindest cut of all. (That is Shakespeare, James. Julius Caesar to be exact. Marc Antony says it in his "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" speech. Aren't I cultured?)

If, forsooth! For three years, I try to convince myself that I *am* an author. I've argued with myself, pleaded with myself, and finally, just when I'm beginning to concede that perhaps I am after all, along comes James, and starts me doubting all over again.

But I'll tell you, James, I'm making a comfortable living out of my writing, and that's what some indiscriminating people might call strong circumstantial evidence in my favor. Of course, you and I know better, but in the words of George Bernard Shaw, who are we against the great majority.

Dear Readers in General: I think the readers of Planet Stories are the most intelligent group of young men and women in the world. As I look about me upon your fresh, shining faces I am overcome with ecstasy at the thought of being one of you. If the young men will form a line, I will hand out cigars. If the young married women will form a line on the other side with their babies; I will kiss their babies (wash faces first, please). If the young unmarried women will form a line in the center I will kiss *them*, and all married women that are young enough and have husbands that are *not* six feet tall may join them.

This glowing tribute, dear Readers, has nothing to do with the fact that I have a story in the current issue. It is thoroughly disinterested. Still, heh-heh, before throwing brick-bats, just remember the cigars I handed out and the babies and others I have kissed.

Cordially,

ISAAC ASIMOV.

Ed. Note: Mrs. Wells didn't scare Mr. A. as much as we thought. He was just girding his loins, biding his time, and—not incidentally—turning out the very superior lead story that begins on page 2.

WHAT HAS FRIEND ASIMOV STARTED!!

Hotel Brownwood
Brownwood, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

I love Moskowitz, I love Moskowitz, I love Moskowitz! Oh, *what* has friend Asimov started?

Seriously, I consider his "Man of the Stars" one of the best S.F. stories I have ever read. Bond, as usual, was very good, with Norman running a close third. I enjoyed "A Planet For Your Thoughts" immensely.

In short, your mag. is swell. But, if it takes a really bad story to get as far as Neptune according to our Hermits' lucid system, Wells' yarn made it effortlessly! I may be dumb (no remarks, please) but I was lost in a fog throughout the story. Even read it twice without grasping the point. Now I *am* mad!

I liked the cover. In fact (got your smelling salts handy?) I think your illustrations are the best, with the exception of Lynch. But *why*, *why* feature a terrible story like "Queen of the Blue World" on it?? Thanks for the bylines on the artists. I have spent many sleepless nights in the past wondering who drew which. By the way, who drew the cover? Let's not hold out on us, Ed.

I can only see one thing wrong with the Vizigraph. The feminine viewpoint isn't represented strongly enough. There are just as many of us "gals" who are fans as there are men, I betcha! However, I have no right to complain, this is *my* first letter, and it will probably be awarded a place in the waste basket. (That's O.Q., Ed., I don't blame you.)

Until February, (damn it!)

So long,

JOSEPHINE MORRISON.

PLEASE—IT'S NOT A ZWILNIK

225 Second St.
California, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

Well, here I am again with my little old worn out typewriter ribbon. Hope it isn't quite so bad that you might not be able to read this letter.

The first thing I am going to say is that I have a rating of the yarns in the Winter Issue. Here it is:

First: "Monster of the Asteroid." My old pal Cummings came through with another winner. Give me a little of Cummings each issue and I will be a steady booster.

Second: "The Lorelei Death." Bond put plenty of OOMPH in this; one of the best stories he ever wrote. Romance, adventure and that certain appeal that holds the reader 'til the story is finished.

Third: "Man of the Stars." A little far-fetched

but still a good piece. Wow! What a man that young Captain must have been.

Fourth: "The Mercurian." Not so hot.

Fifth: "Thief of Mars." Ugh.

Sixth: "A Planet for Your Thoughts. Two ughs.

Seventh: "Espionage in Space." This story was terrible.

Eighth: "Zurk." Asimovsenion must have written the idea for this and incidentally, why don't people let him alone? Just because he writes punk stories is no reason why people must plague him.

That does it. Ruins all chances of this letter being published, I mean. All those brick bats are sure to keep it out of The Vizigraph. So since the matter is settled, I may as well go "whole-hog" and say that this is the worst line up of yarns yet to appear in PLANET. So there.

Since this won't see print I'm going to get something off my chest. Hope I don't make someone angry in what I'm going to say, but say it I must. At heart I am a very peaceful fellow, but at times a dormant Hyde bursts forth in my make up. I'm becoming bored with Fan-Fueds. For instance, I'd like to see Gifford and Asimov shoot each other with one of those twenty-second century pistols. If this seems too gruesome, I have a very fine set of dueling fly swatters I'd be glad to lend out.

Mrs. Margaret Wells also seems to have a pick on Asimov. If he is too noble to argue with a lady please let him know that I am not and will take up the fight for him whether I like his yarns or not. I really think people who razz Cummings are out of the ordinary. Hear, Hear, Wells and Lesser.

I'm even going to jump on you, Ed. If that thing on the cover of the winter issue isn't a Zwillnik, then what in Tarnation is it? The cover was swell; I like Zwillniks. Thanks for the info on the drawings. Hope some of those readers that have some for sale will let me know about them. I'm glad Mrs. Wells got her Bok. (That's the one that I wanted.) If I happen to win one, just pick out for me; 1st. A nice Finlay. 2nd. A big Bok. 3rd. Oh, just any old thing.

Oh yes, the drawings in the winter issue; Paul's, for "Monster of the Asteroid" was swell. Morey stinks. Please don't send me one of these. Lynch's pic for "Espionage in Space" was not up to his usual good standard.

Stevens fell off on that one of his.

Bok . . . Ah.

Well, I guess I'd better sign off for this time. All has been said that can be said, except the votes.

First to Margaret Wells for the things I said . . . and meant.

Second to Bill Stoy. He's tired of this Asenion business too.

Third to Larry Shaw. One of the swiftest letter writers to be heard from in "The Vizigraph."

And now so long, and really, I think PLANET is swell.

VAUGHAN RALF HEINER.

ENTER THE MAD RUSSIAN

140-92 Burden Crescent
Jamaica, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

Sit back, have a Camel (or a wee nip, if you prefer) . . . and prepare for another round with that fiendish madman, that rabid anti Planet-

cover guy. Once more he is preparing to tear the issue into infinitesimal shreds, mentioning the various faults in detail and glossing over any good points. So let's go!

Despite the heroic work poor Bok (alas, another martyr sacrificed for the Cause) did in his struggle with that hoary cover theme, the pic isn't quite up to his usual standard. But, seeing that his standard is excellence par excellence, this cover is still pretty good in fact, very good! (Hm-m, wonder what that dull thud I just heard was? Oh well, probably just the ed. keeling away in a dead faint at my praise.) Still . . . traces of that vile and odious theme are quite discernible, planets are whizzing around per usual, and there's too much lettering. Anyway, a start has at last been made, and I've a feeble hope that such improvement will continue. My one regret is that Bok has had his record spoiled with a merely "very good" cover.

Darn it all, why is it that each time the stories reach a high grade of quality there's a bad slump in the next ish? It's happened once before and now it's happened again . . . for the winter no. is one terrible hangover in comparison with the last ish. Allow me to reverse one of the sentences in my last letter: The main factor causing this fiasco is the stories, none of which were good, all being either fair, poor, or terrible!

Suppose I might as well list the "best" stories—fair as they are. The three of 'em, in order, are—"Man of the Stars," "Thief of Mars," and "The Lorelei Death." Moskowitz's yarn is his best to date, but it definitely would not be in first place were it not for lack of competition. Bond (one of my favorites) has turned out a fair piece of work, tho it seems pitifully like hack when compared with such tales as "The Ultimate Salient." Why is it that such really good authors occasionally turn out poor yarns, when a little extra time spent in rewriting would prevent this?

The less said about such tripe in type as "Monster of the Asteroid" the better. Cummings-ugh!

I like this idea of "illustrated by—" at the beginning of each story. Incidentally, the best interior drawings are the ones by Paul and Stevens (in spite of the poor theme for his pic, there's a symmetry of lines that appeals).

M-mm, ten pages in the Vizi! It's really getting to be the most interesting portion of the mag, and if the stories get any worse, I'll be tempted to ask for a Planet Letters—128 pages of letters—illustrated by the leading artists! Just think of all the money you could save by not buying any stories!

My votes for the best letters go to Gifford (let's have him start the ball rolling by illustrating his next one), Finn (heh-heh! Let's see you send his pic to Ganymede), and Lesser (at least he agreed with me about the fall cover).

Aside to General Washington, Jr.: Them thar nicknames you done thunk up tain't nuthin, son (Ouch! Don't tell me that the insidious dialect of one I. A. is even creeping into my letter!). Why, 'round these yere parts they calls me Tall-Stoy the Terrible, me bein' a direct descendent of that Roosian. The only reason my name is Stoy is that my grandpa was sech a shrimp that he dropped the "To!" part.

Sincerely,

BILL STOV.

Ed. Note: One more pun like that, and the dull thud we'll hear will be the fans dropping the "Stoy" part.

ANOTHER NEW SYSTEM

Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

DEAR EDITOR:

I like to make my letters brief and to the point. The fact that some guy can stuff two columns of space-wash into your Vizigraph merely by first saying "I love you," influences me not a whit. And the Kid from Smolensk can dish out all the allegory. I'll stick to one thing. Without benefit of thesaurus. I strongly affirm that letters should have to do with the body of the magazine, or at least to make a stab at discussing some scientific concept brought out in the stories. Of course if you're going to subordinate your stories to your letter department—Huh, imagine plastering the cover with Planet Letters. Thrilling Epistles by Gifford, Asin—(you know who), Conover. Visualize, if you can, the blurb "Stink-Bug Casts the Hermit's Horoscope."

I'm in a rut. I persist in saying something about the literary and artistic contents of the mag. First of all, Bond was super. Lemme see, lemme see—oh yeah, "Queen of the Blue World." That had me worried. Good or bad? Can't say. Must be good since I couldn't get it having read it just once. "Man of the Stars." Moskowitz is in the groove. He's got the technique, now let him find a plot! Love, I don't know. Seems to me something else should have motivated the Captain. I mean something like an Ideal, or sense of duty, or—or, just plain Man of Destiny feeling. This thing called Love isn't convincing to an old space warped tramp like yrs. truly.

Kinda liked Morey. And Lynch is keeping up the good work.

Yeah, there's some things I didn't like. But what the hell good does it do to yell about them? I'm satisfied if I find *something* I like and you're satisfied if you get my two dimes. So we'll let it go at that.

By the way—don't authors have a code of ethics or something? What about these Trrrrink pleasssse Martians of Bond's? And with chrysanthemum pates, too! It's OK by me. I was just wonderin'. Seems like he could have given them sunflower heads and let them drag out their o's instead of their s's. But if Wellman doesn't give a damn, I should kick!

LAPIN.

P. S. I overlooked to grade the letters. Here goes, and since it seems to be fashionable to invent one's own method of scoring, I hereby unveil the Lapin method. Also I am grading *all* the letters since some readers consider the Vizigraph the *piece de resistance* of your mag.

Gifford, Haig & Haig; Finn, Teacher's Highland Cream; Wellington, Vat 69; Marlow, Old Oscar Pepper; Lesser, Johnny Walker; Shaw, Log Cabin; Brackett, Old Crow; Stoy, Paul Jones; Heiner, Old Rocking Chair; Maxwell, Dixie Belle; Washington, Jr., buttermilk; Cunningham, Gordon's London Dry; Wells, Golden Wedding; Roberts, grape juice; Blair, Old Space Ranger; DeMain, Crab Orchard.

The nicety of my method is at once apparent. No one's feelings can be hurt. Even though I list Gifford first, even Washington, Jr. may comfort himself by saying that not all people care for such strong distillate. Later I hope to make The System more comprehensive, enabling me to give the editor a capsule criticism of stories. This may require extensive lab work.

J. L.

MRS. WILSON'S DILEMMA

General Delivery
Phoenix, Arizona

DEAR EDITOR:

Before bestowing compliments I simply must complain about two of the stories in the Winter '41 issue. Wells' "Queen of the Blue World" seems to be much ado about nothing, while Connell's long, dragged out spy story could have been condensed for better reading.

However, so long as you give us Cummings, Bond and Frank Belknap Long, we really have no right to complain. After reading "Monster of the Asteroid" twice, I still find it utterly engrossing, even if it is another pea in Cummings' pod. (Compare with "Bandits of Time" by Cummings in December Amazing Stories—)

Nelson S. Bond's "The Lorelei Death" is weird and unusual. Salvation Smith is an outstanding favorite and makes Bond's stories truly delightful. An "Oscar" for Bond.

Paul's work cannot be excelled. In black and white, he is painstaking, in color, he is breathtaking—his drawings, I mean, ha!

But oh, dear Editor, why can't we have Ralph Milne Farley? I remember a long time ago his "Radio Man." Would it be possible to have a reprint or perhaps a new story by him?

Also I've a "Time" problem that is all x's. Maybe you can straighten me out. We accept the weird new inventions in stories—ray guns and rocket ships, uranium, ethereal and eklatron, as well as quartz of fabricoid bulgers. They've not been proved impossible so we accept them as plausible PLANET STORIES explanations. However, about this fourth dimension "Time":—No one from the Future visited us yesterday nor at any time in the past. The past has already happened. How could a future time traveler visit you or me yesterday? If we had accomplished time travel we could (possibly) go into the future but we could not retrace time into our grandparents' days even into our own past. How would we feel to visit ourselves when we were ten-year-old kids and change that day's events for ourselves? You see why I call it all x's? It's screwy, that's all. Of course while all these time travel stories make for entertaining reading they cannot be reasoned out from a scientific viewpoint that we readers conscientiously acquire when accepting and applauding PLANET STORIES. What is your opinion?

Yes, I'm a woman reader—A Cummings, Farley and Paul fan. Thanks for PLANET STORIES.

MRS. LUCILLE WILSON.

NO HERMIT HE

1301 State Street
Schenectady, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

I was glad (at first) to see another of my letters in print. But when I read the answer to it, and saw what a mess I had made—well!

Really, tho, the mistake is quite obvious. Especially to anyone who knows anything about the Warner system. I would be very surprised at your not spotting it; that is, I would be if I didn't strongly suspect that you *had* figured it out. Here it is: instead of using "Sol" for No. 1, I use it for No. 10. See how simple?

Lots of fans criticize author Ed Hamilton for the way he throws planets and even universes around. But I'm even better. I wrecked a whole "solar system" by merely leaving off one

decimal place! That should be some sort of a record.

My tears over the ruins of a perfectly good rating system turn to tears of joy as I view the cover. The painting was undoubtedly the best so far, even better than the Paul. But are you trying to start a revolution. Really, Mr. Reiss, blue sky? BLUE sky? On a sf magazine? Simply unheard of. And on top of that, the heroine saves the hero!

The ringed planets on the cover never bothered me much till now, but they really look bad on this cover. Yank them please. There is also too much lettering on the picture.

The stories were a terrible drop over the fall issue. And I do mean terrible! "The Lorelei Death" was pretty good. It didn't rate as feature story, tho. "Man of the Stars" was the best story, but it could have been lots better. Swell characterization. Reminded me somehow of Captain Horatio Hornblower.

Now look. I'm a fairly intelligent guy, I always get good marks in school, and I can usually figure things out pretty well. But just what was "Queen of the Blue World" supposed to be? Was there a plot concealed somewhere in the gibberish.

All of the other stories were just plain mediocre, some a little better than the others, but none even worthy of mention.

As for the art; Lynch seems to be improving (the one for "M.O.T.S." was a honey), Morey I still can't take, Bok was superb, Stevens was pretty good but slightly confusing, and Paul was not up to par.

Now the Vizigrah. The bigger the better, but what a job to pick the best. Give originals to Marlow, Lesser, and Maxwell in that order. I did not vote for the first two just because they voted for me. (Not much!)

This Gifford guy is good. I'd like to have him analyze me. I love Maxwell! I must write to him. Official Agitator, huh! This looks like a really worthwhile society, for once. Reminds me, too, that I'm bringing out my own fanzine soon. It hasn't been named yet, but it will be about 24 pages for a dime. And it will be good. This Bond-Wellman business is *not* pure coincidence. Bond asked Wellman for the use of his Martians. (Read "Sun Spots" for the inside info.)

For your answer to my letter, you get Mars, Mr. Reiss. At least, I *did* get an answer.

Yes, I, too, want PLANET monthly, or at least bi-monthly. When? Three cheers for the BSFWRS! Stoy should be happy now, he has a companion martyr. Guess who?

For a really good fantasy picture, see "Here Comes Mr. Jordan," Raym. Maxwell wants fewer interplanetarys, don't you dare! That's what we want in PLANET. Finn's letter is very pretty, but is it art?

Three more cheers for the 4 WS-F Con. And why not illustrate the letters? They deserve it more than the stories.

We want Eron, Dold, Dolgov, and Hall. If I win, I'll take the Bok, or Lynch for "M.O.T.S."

Yours in Sf,

LARRY SHAW.

(Official Agitator, SFTSO . . . etc., also the Universe Wrecker.)

P. S. No, I'm not "The Hermit" any more. I've found out that there are plenty of fans around here, and I hope to have a club going soon. Thanx to PLANET for its help.

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